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25

SPORTSPERSON *of the* YEAR

Sports Illustrated

FEBRUARY 2026
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SHAI
GILGEIOUS-ALEXANDER

BY CHRIS MANNIX

PHOTOGRAPH BY
CLAY PATRICK MCBRIDE







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LINEUP

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FACES IN THE CROWD P. 21
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*The 2025 Sportsper-
son of the Year,
Shai Gilgeous-
Alexander posed for the
cover of this
issue with
OKC fans at
Paycom Center
in December.*

ON THE COVER

*Jacket and pants by MAGLIANO
Shirt by TONYWACK
Glasses by CHROME HEARTS
Watch by AUDEMARS PIGUET
Gloves by ERL*

THIS PAGE

*Jacket by JACQUEMUS
Shirt by TONYWACK
Pants by MAGLIANO
Glasses by CHROME HEARTS
Watch by AUDEMARS PIGUET
Gloves by ERL*

*Styling by JASON BOLDEN
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Braiding by ALYSHA BONADIE
at BONABRAIDS
Grooming by TERESA LUZ*



SAUCE FOR DÖGS



LINEUP

HILL THRILL

After Olympic disappointment in Beijing four years ago, Mikaela Shiffrin will lead the U.S. charge in the Italian Alps.



MILAN • CORTINA
2026

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SCORECARD

ESSAY

What's in The Cards?

THREE FORMER ATHLETES OFFER INSIGHT INTO THE LATEST GAMBLING CRISIS TO ROCK THE SPORTS WORLD

► BY L. JON WERTHEIM

► ILLUSTRATIONS BY DAVIDE BARCO

THE REPUBLIC of Sports is still reeling from the indictments against Trail Blazers coach Chauncey Billups, Heat guard Terry Rozier, former NBA player Damon Jones and 30 other defendants on gambling-related charges in the fall. (Billups and Rozier have been suspended by the NBA; along with Jones, they pled not guilty to criminal charges.)

Allegations of exploiting prop bets and undermining honest competition have become almost numbingly commonplace. The NBA, Major League Baseball, college sports...pick a sector and it's

been rocked by corruption, hardly surprising given the legality, ease and omnipresence of sports gambling. As one *New York Times* headline read in the wake of the indictments, "I'm Shocked, Shocked to Find That Gambling Is Going On in Here."

But the Justice Department's allegations of a mafia scheme to rig illegal poker games in New York City and across the country? Those have generated genuine shock and awe. SPORTS ILLUSTRATED reached out to three former athletes in three different sports known to play in high-stakes private poker games. On the condition of anonymity,



they spoke about what did—and did not—surprise them about these explosive revelations.

An amalgam of their insights:

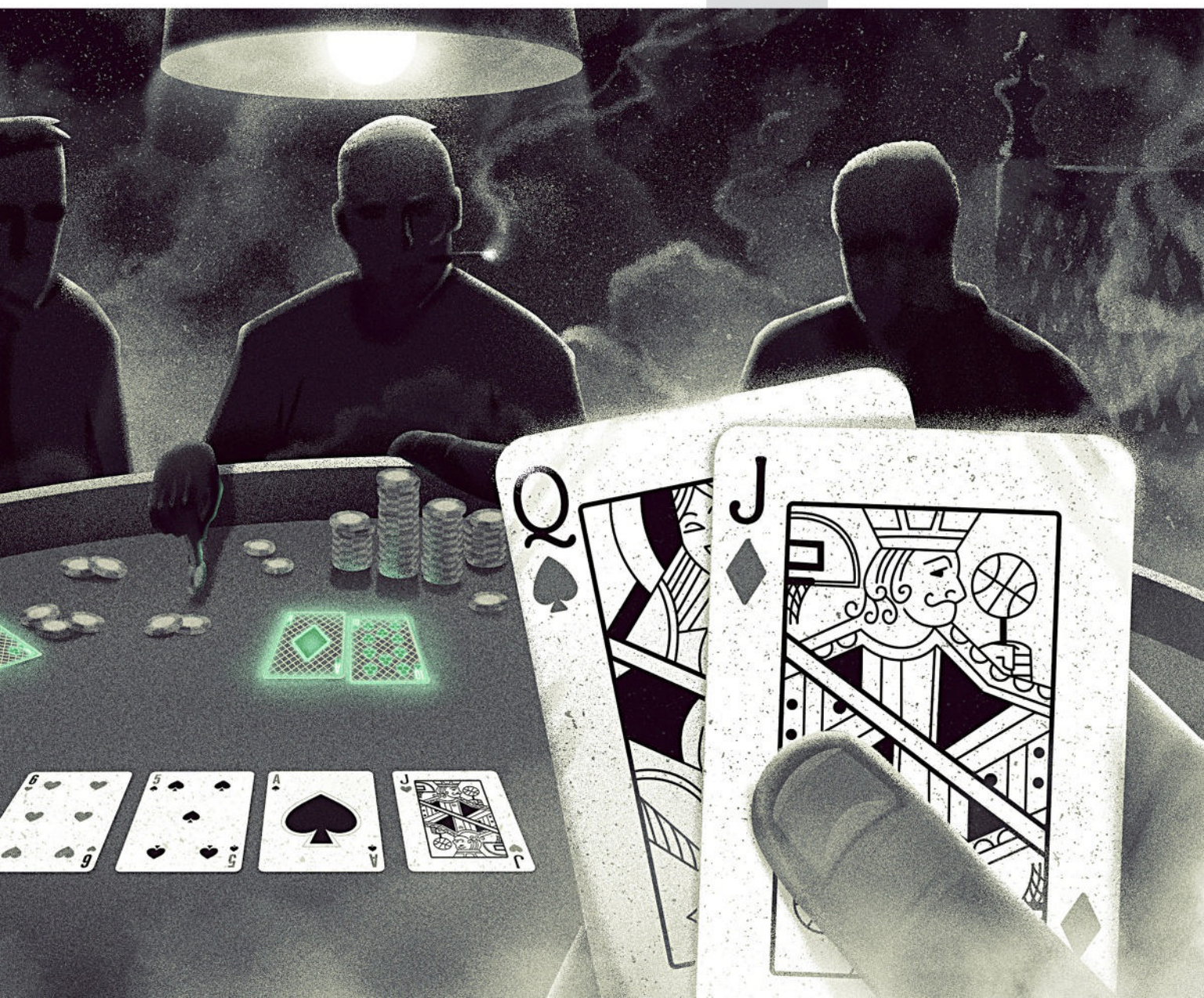
- “I keep hearing, ‘Why would athletes get involved in games like this?’ Come on. You have guys with money. They’re competition junkies. They love that feeling of hitting the winning shot, being the best. They think because they can hit a jump shot or throw strikes in the ninth inning they are the

best at everything in life. They’re unicorns. They want to show the hedge fund guy they can stare him down and make a ballsier bet. You go to a private game and it’s probably like your poker night. There’s guy talk. There’s bulls---. There’s trash talk. But the buy-in and the bets are much bigger. These games were almost invented for athletes.”

- “Why not put on a baseball cap, lay low and go to a private room in Vegas? For some guys, maybe it’s

the taxes. But I think for a lot of people the private game is more fun. You’re in New York or L.A., you get a text and you show up. It’s a lot easier than planning a trip to Vegas. And you get there and you’re more comfortable.”

- “The “face card” [a well-known figure who draws in other players] isn’t uncommon. I’ve played with all kinds of celebrities. Athletes. Movie stars. Not Chauncey, but another NBA star from the same era. Kids





"I DON'T BET ON SPORTS. BUT IT'S EASY TO SEE HOW POKER LEADS YOU TO SPORTS."

of famous billionaires. Usually, you have some idea who's going to be there in advance. Sometimes it's a huge action player. Sometimes it's someone that everyone knows is terrible. My understanding was that [the athlete face cards] weren't getting paid. But in exchange for bringing in players—even better, for bringing in suckers—they might get a kickback, some reduction of their losses."

- "I've been in rigged games before, I think most people have. How did I know? You can have a

lucky hand. But again and again? That doesn't happen. One game, guys kept changing places at the table. Another time, a beautiful woman was there who said she was still learning. She was asking for help with strategy. She joked that she was about to give away her money. She wins and it's, *Must be beginner's luck*. When she won the first time, everyone laughed. An hour later she's still winning? I'm like, *I'm outta here*."

- "Rigged games happen, for sure. I haven't heard of the X-ray

table. That one is crazy. But I've heard of the contact lenses. I've heard of mirrors on shoes. The one you hear a lot is radio frequency cards. The cards are chipped and someone will put their phone on the table. Sometimes people don't know the cards per se, but they know in advance who is going to win. If you have a thin wire and you hear, 'Seat 8 is going to win,' you bet accordingly."

- "One thing about athletes—maybe, people in general—they are [awed] by cash. If you say, 'That guy makes \$10 million a year,' it's like, *O.K. that's cool*. But see a guy leave with \$100,000 in cash and everyone is like, *Oh, man!*"

- "Most of the games I play in don't have cash changing hands. I've never brought a bag of cash or anything like that. It's mostly done with markers and then wiring money you lost. I might worry about wire fraud. There's still a paper trail. But it's not betting slips."

- "I really hope Chauncey Billups didn't do what he was accused of, or at least didn't know that the games were dirty. If he knew in advance these were rigged games and was still inviting people, yeah, that's about as bad as it gets."

- "What do I think happened? I don't know, of course. But if someone makes a bad decision early in their career, the [mafia] doesn't forget. Maybe they have some compromising information. Maybe there's still an outstanding debt. Could be years later, but when the time is right they strike."

- "Personally, I don't bet on sports. But it's easy to see how poker leads you to sports. I'm sure a lot of people are following this very closely."

- "The old line about poker definitely holds true. If you look around the table and can't tell who the sucker is, it's you." □

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SCORECARD: GOLF

STAY THE COURSE

► BY JOHN SCHWARB



1



3



4



2

GOLF HASN'T slowed yet on its post-pandemic heater. The sport that millions took up or rediscovered in 2020, enjoying the fresh air of wide-open spaces, has seen participation numbers grow by more than 50%. Many top resorts have lotteries for tee times and greens fees have crept higher with demand surging. Weekend PGA Tour viewership was up 22% in 2025.

The equipment industry remains robust too, with innovation continuing to surge and brands racing to one-up each other in the marketplace. In short: There's a lot of golf to go around.

DUFFERS AND HARDCORE PLAYERS ARE FLOCKING

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2. Srixon

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3. FootJoy

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Spikeless shoes remain popular for their on- and off-course flexibility, and this reimagined model is lighter with improved ground connectivity.

4. Scotty Cameron

OC PUTTER

The OC stands for "Onset Center" and refers to the shaft position, set back from the putter's head and in line with its center of gravity, minimizing torque.

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ON THE GREEN

HANDS-FREE (ALMOST)

Putting is arguably the most important and maddening part of golf, with the “yips” having ended pro careers and sent amateurs running to other sports. No type of putter could ever claim to cure them, but zero- and low-torque putters come a bit closer.

First popularized by L.A.B. Golf—most notably with a putter J.J. Spaun (*below*) used to win the 2025 U.S. Open—and followed since by leading club manufacturers, the putters are designed to keep the face square through impact—meaning players don’t have to do the job with their hands. The putters have mallet-style heads that sometimes earn their owners jokes on the greens about cattle branding, but golf scorecards don’t have room for pictures and any questionable aesthetics tend to be forgotten with every 10-footer that finds the hole. □

TO THE LINKS. HERE’S THE GEAR THEY NEED

5. Bridgestone Golf E12 SPLASH GOLF BALLS

Players who like to play at sunrise may want to consider these balls, which have a hydrophobic coating designed to repel water and reduce mud buildup.

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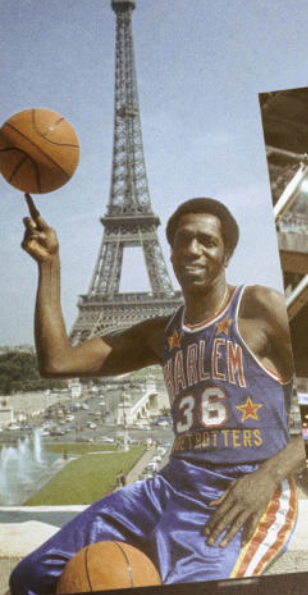
7. Bushnell AI-SLOPE RANGEFINDER

Distances are in the palm of your hand with Bushnell’s smallest rangefinder, which vibrates upon locking on the flag and compensates for elevation.

8. Turtlebox RANGER SPEAKER

Many recreational golfers prefer to play while cruising in a cart with music, and this Bluetooth speaker has magnetic side mounts and battery life to last multiple rounds.





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SCORECARD: HISTORY

STILL HOT TO TROT

AS THE GLOBETROTTERS TURN 100, A TEAM LEGEND LOOKS BACK—AND TO THE FUTURE

► BY L. JON WERTHEIM

BUST OUT the confetti from the plastic bucket. This year the Harlem Globetrotters are celebrating their 100th anniversary. Yes, it's been a century of the best-known team in basketball staying true to its name and circumventing planet Earth, reliably generating smiles, winning the games and weaving WWE-style entertainment and highlight-reel hoops with a message of social justice.

Still, it's a curious time for the Globies. The strength of the franchise persists, but it's had to update and adapt to the times. There is no longer the ultimate brand extension, a Saturday morning cartoon show to spread the gospel to a young audience. Half-court shots and behind-the-back passes are still cool, but you can find a bottomless trove of them on YouTube. More cosmically, when not only are the majority of NBA players Black, but also a brownstone in Harlem costs \$5 million, does the underlying parable of the fun-loving team from the underprivileged neighborhood, clowning the humorless establishment (and overwhelmingly white) Washington Generals still resonate as it once did?

Still, the "Trotters trot on, with three separate troupes touring

simultaneously, each group logging more than 200 games a year. Today, there are the familiar alley-oops, but also a four-point line. *Sweet Georgia Brown* is accompanied by the latest hip-hop. Amid the standard gags like the Magic Circle and divorcing the Generals' coach from his pants, there are pop culture references (*six seven, six seven*). A roster that includes women and a little person, 4' 5" Hot Shot Swanson, but also incorporates familiar faces.

None more than Lou Dunbar. "Sweet Lou" was a hell of a player in his day, a 6' 9" forward named Mr. Basketball in his home state of Louisiana. He then played for the University of Houston shortly after the Elvin Hayes era, averaging more than 22 points a game. He was a fourth-round pick by the Sixers in the 1975 NBA draft, but when he wasn't given enough minutes for his liking in NBA training camps, he decided to join Meadowlark Lemon, Geese Ausby, Curly Neal, et al., on the Globetrotters. He'd not only have more fun, he'd make more money.

Marrying his basketball skills with an irrepressible smile, Dunbar would become a fixture for 27 seasons, one of only eight Globetrotters to have his jersey retired. (He's also done turns on

The Love Boat and *Family Feud*.) Almost a half century later, he's still a front-facing figure. At age 72, he is currently the director of personnel and a coach of one of the teams, which sometimes includes overseeing his son, Lou Dunbar Jr., d/b/a Sweet Lou II, who wears his father's No. 41 jersey.

A Globetrotter, in some capacity, for nearly 50 years, who better to ask for a status update?

SI: *Where are we catching you?*

Sweet Lou Dunbar: London.

SI: *You're used to the travel, no?*

SLD: I've done it a couple years.

SI: *What does it mean to be a Harlem Globetrotter in 2025?*

SLD: Coaching with the Harlem Globetrotters is like raising kids. *[Laughs.]*

SI: *Say more.*

SLD: You know it's hard, man. It's something you've done all your life, and you're just trying to spread the wealth—your knowledge of what you've learned from the years. And it's really fun, teaching these younger players the ropes and getting them to follow a great tradition that's been going on for so long. So it's been a good role for me.

SI: *What are you telling these kids when they audition?*

SLD: First of all, know your history. You know, you're trying to join something that you probably don't know much about. Young kids these days, trust me, they don't know a lot about the Harlem Globetrotters. And we try to explain to them, know what you're getting into, because once you become a Harlem Globetrotter, you're not representing yourself anymore. You represent the iconic organization that's been around now for—let's get it out—100 years.

SI: *How did you end up as a Globetrotter?*



“[GOOD BASKETBALL] IS WHAT THE HARLEM GLOBETROTTERS ARE ALL ABOUT,” SAYS DUNBAR.

SLD: I left Houston. I was [drafted by the 76ers]. I went to Europe. I played one year in Switzerland, and we won the Swiss championship. And, you know, I had the opportunity to play in the European Cup over there. I made the same money I would have made in Philly. And when I got back home, I signed a free agent contract with the Houston Rockets, and I went to play in the summer. And they

kind of played me sparingly. I was young and ready to go. And when I was out there, a guy from the Globetrotters said, “Would you like to come to the Globetrotters’ training camp?” I said, “Man, I’d love to.” And the rest is pretty much history.

SI: *You were Mr. Basketball in Louisiana, you were an NBA draft pick. I’m guessing being a Globetrotter is a different kind of*

FROM TOP: ABC PHOTO ARCHIVES/DISNEY; GENERAL ENTERTAINMENT CONTENT/GETTY IMAGES; WILDFORD/HANEWOOD/DISNEY/GETTY IMAGES



basketball player now. What are you looking for?

SLD: Yeah, I wasn't bad. We still look for good basketball players, because that's what the Harlem Globetrotters are all about. All the things that you see the players do to spin the balls, and all the tricks that we do in the Magic Circle—that comes with time. So we figured, if you can play the game, we can teach you this other stuff. And you know, it's also about your character. I've seen a lot of great basketball players come out here, but they couldn't be Harlem Globetrotters because they couldn't deal with people. And that's what we do every day. And that's kind of sad sometimes. You see those players, you say, "Man, he's great but he can't talk to people."

Si: Steph Curry wouldn't be a half-bad Globetrotter, would he?

SLD: Oh, man, he would be lighting 'em up on tour.

Si: But the outgoing personality, that's a job qualification, right?

SLD: Oh, my goodness, it's a necessity. We can't force you to be a people person. Let me give you a prime example. [Former Purdue player Cherelle "Torch"] George came here, and I said, "You need to smile a little bit." Now we can't keep her from smiling, and she's become a tremendous Globetrotter. This is her ninth season.

Si: What's the balance between the tradition and updating for technology, for attention spans, in 2026?

SLD: It's hard every year. I can

HARLEM SHUFFLE

The Globetrotters have hobnobbed with TV stars and visited the White House in their storied history.

remember back in the day when I was playing and I was walking through an airport in Miami. We were going to South America, and I heard this father tell his son, "Hey, look son, there go the Harlem Globetrotters." The kid was like, "Who?"

But, you know, I think the reason for that is we weren't keeping up with the times. Now, we got the lights, we got the glitter, and we still got the tradition running. We're still good, clean, wholesome entertainment, and that's what kept us around for 100 years. But we keep the basketball fresh. Every showman today—like Hammer, Bulldog, Mac and Thunder—I always tell these guys, "You are the head of the party. To give a party, you got to bring something to it. Don't rely on the things you me do. Keep it fresh. You got to relate to these younger kids." Like, I just found out about this six seven.



SI: How much is improvisation? How much are you kind of locked in to make sure you hit the classics?

SLD: A lot of it is improv, because there's no two games alike. That's the beauty of this thing. Give the guys a bit of freedom, because if they were handcuffed to do something every night the same way, that's no fun. I used to tell these guys all the time, "You got to know what's going on in the building." You're running up and down that floor, trying to play basketball, and you see a lady getting up, going to the bathroom. "Hey lady, where you going?" I know she's leaving. You got to be able to react to that. And just a lot of spontaneous things that go on.

SI: How much are you tailoring to a market? How much are you like, "Hey, we're going to Stockholm.

Here are five things you need to know about Sweden."

SLD: When you go to a different country, say *hello*, *goodbye* and *I love you*, the little things. They love to hear you speaking that language. If they hear you trying to speak their language, man, you got them right there. Also find out who their best soccer teams are. There might be a language barrier, but a smile is a smile everywhere you go.

SI: How many countries have you been to?

SLD: About 95. I haven't been to South Africa. I've never been to Jamaica. So that's two. I'm trying to get to those couple places.

SI: What's the sleeper basketball country, the place where you play that people might not think really likes hoops?

SLD: Spanish-speaking countries go crazy over basketball. Spain.

I mean, we get 30,000 people now these days. It's crazy.

SI: Where do the Globetrotters fit into the basketball culture today as you see it?

SLD: I think we're going to be around for a little while. You know, we play as real basketball players. And I think for us, the basketball just gets better. We are getting younger talent. You know, younger legs. My coach once told me, "Son, there's no substitute for youth." And as I got older, I understood that, because the mind says, "Go," but the legs say, "No."

SI: These guys are in shape. This is athletics as well as entertainment. There's a lot of durability.

SLD: People don't realize the amount of time these athletes spend in the gymnasium. When we're on the road, when we are touring, we're in the gym... working on our stuff, these kids, these young ladies and men, they put forth the effort. If you want to be a true Harlem Globetrotter, you gotta put the time in.

SI: What's it like for you watching your son, the second generation?

SLD: He's loving it. He works on his craft. He's one of the top ballhandlers in the organization now. It's funny, I sent one of my old teammates some footage of him handling the ball in the circle. Osmond "The Wizard" Lockhart—he was the first foreign-born player we had from the Bahamas. So I sent Ozzy footage of Lil' Lou in the circle, and then he couldn't wait to get it out of his mouth. He said, "He better than you." I said, "Shut up, man." □

SEAT OF POWER

Dunbar has gone from a clown prince as a player to a coach and the team's director of personnel.

DUNBAR TELLS HIS PLAYERS, "TO GIVE A PARTY, YOU GOT TO BRING SOMETHING TO IT."



FROM LEFT: STEVE CAMPBELL/HOUSTON CHRONICLE/
GETTY IMAGES; ETIAN WILLEN/GETTY IMAGES

FACES IN THE CROWD

► BY DAN FALKENHEIM

NOMINATE NOW

To submit a candidate for Faces in the Crowd, email faces@si.com.



MICHAEL ZHENG ► Sport: Tennis ► Hometown: Montville, N.J.

Zheng, a senior at Columbia, defeated SMU's Trevor Svajda 6–4, 1–6, 6–3 to win his second consecutive NCAA Division I singles championship, becoming the first men's tennis player to win back-to-back titles since 2012. The victory also gave Zheng the record for the most career individual NCAA tournament wins (19). He cracked the ATP top 200 for the first time in October, having won his first Challenger title in August.



ADALYNN BIEGLER ► Sport: Swimming ► Hometown: Big Lake, Minn.

Adalynn, a junior at Monticello High, broke the Class A 200-yard freestyle record with a time of 1:46.93 to win the girls' state championship in the event. She also took titles in the 100-yard butterfly (53.48) and the 200 and 400 freestyle relays, guiding the Magic to its first girls' state swimming team crown. A Tennessee commit, Adalynn set the Class A state records in the 50 and 100 free in 2024.



HABTOM SAMUEL ► Sport: Cross-Country ► Hometown: Keren, Eritrea

Samuel, a junior at New Mexico, won the NCAA Division I men's cross-country title in Columbia, Mo., with a 10K time of 28:33.9, having finished as the event runner-up at the last two national championships. Named the D-I USTFCCCA National Athlete of the Year, Samuel is the first man to win three consecutive Mountain West Conference individual cross-country titles.

FLAG FOOTBALL

Dual Star

► **"TODAS LAS** *paradas, Jessica para y sigue.*" Vincent Memorial High quarterback Azul Trujillo relayed the call—all stops, *Jessica stop-and-go*—in Spanish, and hit her favorite target, wide receiver Jessica Manriquez, for a 20-yard game-winner that delivered the Scots' first CIF Division II flag football title in a 40–34 victory over Imperial High.

That moment followed her back at school. "I was excited because everyone at school was looking at us, knowing that we won," says Azul, a sophomore who set the national single-season record for passing yards (9,503). "They put our posters up."

Azul took up flag football in grade school when her father's friend invited her to join a team to avoid a forfeit. For the Calexico, Calif., native, whose parents and grandparents are from Mexico, the sport has since grown into a passion that stretches across borders. She has won on both sides—two NFL FLAG titles in the U.S. and three Torneo del Sol crowns in Mexico—but she represents Team USA. She helped the U-15 national team win silver at the 2025 Junior International Cup.

"[My family] teases me, but they're proud of me playing with Team USA," she says. "That's who I want to represent." □



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PHOTOGRAPH BY
CLAY PATRICK McBRIDE

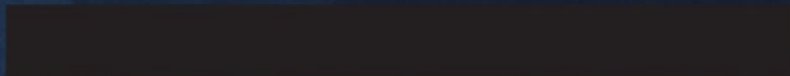
STYLING BY JASON BOLDEN
HAIR BY MOE HARB
BRAIDING BY ALYSHA BONADIE AT BONABRAIDS
GROOMING BY TERESA LUZ
JACKET AND GLASSES BY ERL

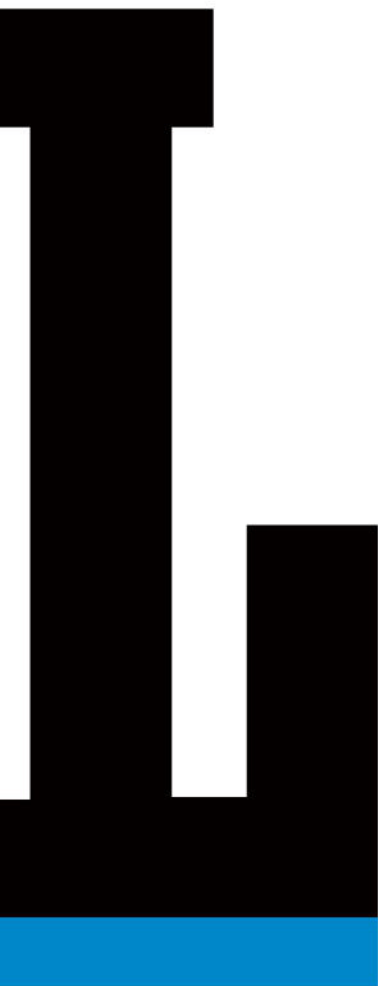


Raised outside of Toronto,

SHAI GILGEOUS-ALEXANDER

has found the perfect home: Oklahoma City, where he's leading the Thunder to unprecedented heights, forging a bond with the community and showing that anything is possible in a place where hoops is the only game in town





S O
T Y

LAST JUNE, with the confetti still being swept off the Paycom Center floor, a blue-clad crowd gathered inside the Broadway 10 Bar & Chophouse to celebrate Oklahoma City's NBA championship. Surrounded by friends and family (and a healthy number of their friends and *their* families), Thunder players, coaches and staffers partied deep into the night. Guests picked at buffet tables lined with steak medal-

ions and crab cakes. Against a wall, the Larry O'Brien trophy rested as a prop for pictures. Champagne that went largely untouched in Oklahoma City's locker room—what do you expect from a title winner led by a bunch of early-20-somethings who needed help figuring out how to pop the cork?—flowed liberally into glass flutes. A few freshly shotgunned beer cans littered the floor. In the middle of it all was Shai Gilgeous-Alexander, the NBA's MVP, scoring champion and Finals MVP, the fourth player ever to complete that trifecta in one season. In between hugs and high fives, Gilgeous-Alexander was overheard offering a promise: *I can be so much better.*

"Well," says Gilgeous-Alexander, "*I can be.*" It's mid-November and he is in the backseat of a black SUV speeding down an empty Oklahoma City highway. The suggestion that it seemed strange to be thinking about improving after one of the greatest single seasons in sports history draws a shrug. "I think more than anything I was excited by the fact that I had achieved those things and still had so much room to grow," he says. As a teenager, Gilgeous-Alexander jotted down goals in a notebook. *Division I scholarship. NBA player. Lottery pick.* Over time the goals got more ambitious. *All-Star. MVP. NBA champion.* "There's an obsessiveness to him," says Nate Mitchell, who has been training Gilgeous-Alexander since he was 16.

There's also a palpable self-assuredness to Gilgeous-Alexander. He doesn't see anything about his success as all that complicated. ("Nothing about him boils down to like an epiphany or an anecdote," says Thunder coach Mark Daigneault.) He ties his rise to NBA superstardom to what earned him a scholarship to Kentucky or turned him into a lottery pick. "The way I saw it was when I was in ninth grade, nobody saw me and was like, 'He's going to be the 11th pick in the NBA draft,'" says Gilgeous-Alexander. "And I did it, so why can't I just implement the same thing on a different scale, on a different level using the same process?"

That work bred confidence. Last May, Oklahoma City lost Game 3 of the conference semifinals in overtime, giving Denver a 2-1 series lead. As the Nuggets celebrated, cameras caught Gilgeous-Alexander grinning while a fan heckled him as he walked off the floor. "In my mind I was like, *When we win, you're going to feel like absolute dogs---*," he says. "That's why I started laughing. He's acting like they won Game 7. I was like, *I'm going to remember that face.* He'll feel it when we win."

"Ruthlessly consistent" is how Daigneault describes Gilgeous-Alexander. Daigneault first met him in 2019, when Shai was acquired from the Clippers as the centerpiece of a deal with the Clippers for Paul George. Well, sort of. The real prize at the time was the cache of draft picks, five first-rounders and two swaps. Gilgeous-Alexander was a skinny combo guard coming off a decent rookie year.

Daigneault, then an assistant, liked what he saw early. When COVID-19 shut the season down in 2020, the team scattered. Months later, when the NBA returned,

Dissin' Cousin

Gilgeous-Alexander grew up learning the game in Canada with Alexander-Walker, but their family bond didn't stop the Thunder star from dropping 30 on the Hawks in an October game that Oklahoma City won 117-100.



Daigneault was struck by the changes to Gilgeous-Alexander's physique and his game, calling an early scrimmage a "whoa moment." Asked about Gilgeous-Alexander's pandemic improvements, Mitchell launches into a description of hourslong workouts at an empty gym before pausing. "Wait," he says, "can we still get in trouble for that?"

Oklahoma City's rise to NBA champion has been methodical. The Thunder won 22 games in 2020–21, a season after having stripped away the last remnants of their first would-be dynasty. They won a whopping 24 the next season and didn't crack .500 until '23–24. There were double-digit losing streaks, pick-centric deals and (justifiable) grumblings of tanking from league officials. But the Thunder never deviated. They believed in the plan, and it paid off.

Gilgeous-Alexander is wired similarly. He was cut from his high school's version of a junior varsity team. It took him 15 games to permanently crack the starting lineup at Kentucky. Three guards were taken before him in the 2018 draft. In his first season with the Thunder, he was an off-the-ball complement to Chris Paul. Skepticism didn't dissuade him. It motivated him. "He had a vision for himself," says Daigneault. "He saw this earlier and clearer than anyone."

Did he see this, being named SPORTS ILLUSTRATED's 2025 Sportsman of the Year? Probably

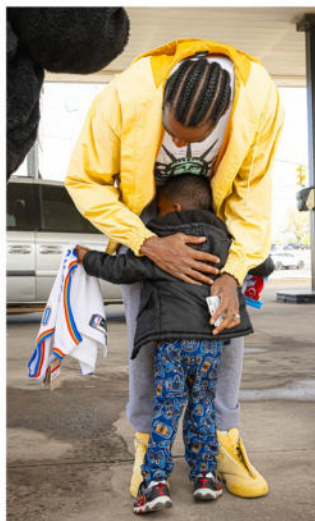
not, though his mother, Charmaine, insists her two boys, 27-year-old Shai and his younger brother, Thomasi, were avid readers of SI KIDS. Still, Gilgeous-Alexander is the 72nd recipient of SI's top honor and the first Canadian to win the award outright since Wayne Gretzky in 1982. He earned it for leading the Thunder to a franchise record 68-win season. For steering the team to two Game 7 closeouts in the playoffs. For etching the name of a small market oil town in the heart of college football country onto basketball's most coveted trophy. For his charitable works, both in OKC and in Canada.

And for not taking his foot off the gas. Through mid-December, Oklahoma City was 24–2, miles ahead of its closest competitor in the Western Conference. The Thunder went 18–1 before Jalen Williams, an All-NBA guard, had played a minute. Shai has been the driving force, with numbers across the board equal to or better than last season. Not since 2018 has the NBA had a back-to-back champion, but with Gilgeous-Alexander the Thunder are the favorites to do it. And if you believe him, he's just getting started.

SHAI PLAYED A VARIETY OF SPORTS BEFORE SETTLING ON BASKETBALL. "I THINK **I LOVE THE GAME** SO MUCH BECAUSE I WAS NEVER BURNED OUT BY IT."

Re2pect

The outgoing Gilgeous-Alexander has become a stalwart in the community—both in OKC and Ontario—endearing him to fans of all ages.





IN NOVEMBER, after Gilgeous-Alexander cooked his team for 30-plus points, a rival assistant coach bemoaned the lack of ways to stop him. It isn't just that SGA is efficient in the paint (51.9%), from midrange (50%) and beyond the arc (37.5%). "He's a 6' 6" Tim Duncan," grumbled the coach. When he attacks the rim, he's unpredictable: Shai finished last season in the top five in shots out of drives, passes out of drives and *assists* out of drives, along with getting to the free throw line nearly nine times per game. "The body control, the handle, and you combine that with the touch," says Warriors coach Steve Kerr. "There's an art to that. He's mastered that art." Indeed, it's as if Gilgeous-Alexander was manufactured on an assembly line of superstar parts.

He wasn't. He grew up in Hamilton, a port city in hockey-mad Ontario. "That's not our style," Charmaine Gilgeous says. She is an energetic 53-year-old, a self-styled alpha female who refers to former Canadian prime minister Justin Trudeau as "the one dating y'all's Katy Perry." She was raised in Scarborough, a suburb of Toronto popular among immigrants. Charmaine's parents came from Antigua and Barbuda in the 1970s. She took to track early, earning a scholarship to Alabama, where she became a five-time All-American and earned a spot as a sprinter for Antigua and Barbuda in the '92 Olympics.

Charmaine's approach to sports was simple: *Try everything*. Before track stuck, she dabbled in gymnastics,

hockey, figure skating. She eventually found her calling. Her children, she reasoned, would do the same. Shai spent his youth shuttling from basketball courts to soccer pitches, football fields to hockey rinks. He even dabbled in skateboarding. "I think I love the game so much," he says, "because I was never burned out by it."

Charmaine knew her kids would be athletes. "Good genetics," she says proudly. Track was out. "Horrible mechanics," she says with a laugh. Football interested Shai for a while. Soccer stuck longer. When Shai committed fully to basketball, Charmaine told him: *Set no limits*. Her words, says Thomasi, were "undercover lessons." Meaning: "We don't need anyone's validation or approval." Adds Shai, "She always made delusional confidence seem normal."

Basketball became all-consuming. Vaughn Alexander, Shai's father, renovated the top of a vacant garage into a full court. Shai, Thomasi, who played two seasons at Evansville, and Nickeil Alexander-Walker, the Hawks guard and Shai's cousin, spent countless summer hours there, running drills, firing worn-down basketballs through chain-link nets. YouTube offered Shai his basketball education: Allen Iverson's crossover. Kobe Bryant's fadeaways. Dwyane Wade's Eurosteps. In high school he studied Rod Strickland, a similarly built guard who excelled using pace and angles. He'd watch, rewatch and then practice the moves relentlessly.





SPORTSPERSON OF THE YEAR

PHOTOGRAPHS BY
CLAY PATRICK
MCBRIDE

JACKET, PANTS,
GLASSES AND
GLOVES BY ERL
SHIRT BY BRIONI
WATCH BY
AUDEMARS PIGUET
SHOES BY SGA X
CONVERSE

He learned to control his emotions. Use them, really. This version of Gilgeous-Alexander is unflappable. He doesn't yell at teammates. "We have coaches for that," he says. He doesn't get rattled. "An unwavering sense of poise" is how Nickeil describes it.

That wasn't always true. Gilgeous-Alexander described himself as a hotheaded teenager. Nothing serious. "Kid stuff," says Charmaine. In his first few weeks at Kentucky he'd call his mom fuming at his lack of playing time. Still, he knew he needed to control his emotions. Harness them. "Weaponize them," says Gilgeous-Alexander. "Like use anger or use sadness, use excitement, use them in ways that can help me and motivate me. I think especially the negative emotions. As a kid, I always shied away or acted like I didn't feel them, and then it would be overwhelming and I would explode. And it would be an inappropriate setting or time or place. I would look crazy. Figuring out how to reverse that was big for me."

Big, too, for Oklahoma City. That steadiness proved useful during the Thunder's title run. In Game 7 against Denver in the conference semis, Gilgeous-Alexander racked up 35 points in 36 minutes. In the championship-deciding game against Indiana, he scored 29. Like the

Final Word

With the title on the line against the Pacers, SGA topped 30 points in four of seven games, leading to an age-appropriate locker room celebration.



stars he patterned his play after, Gilgeous-Alexander thrives in pressure moments. "He has about the highest level of emotional regulation and maturity as you could possibly expect from somebody," says Daigneault. "And for our team, it's contagious."

THERE'S A story Thunder GM Sam Presti likes to share. In the summer of 2019, he was in his office at the Thunder practice facility putting the finishing touches on a roster deconstruction. He had finalized the deal for George and was close to an agreement with Houston for Russell Westbrook. That night, after working on an op-ed for *The Oklahoman* that detailed how the team would dig itself out of the basketball rubble, Presti was walking down a hallway and heard the sound of a bouncing basketball. It was Gilgeous-Alexander, fresh off completing his physical, in the gym getting up shots. Watching from an office window Presti thought to himself: *Wouldn't it be something if this guy turned out to be a really good player.*

Presti, certainly, won't claim to have foreseen an MVP talent—no one did—but once it became apparent, the organization mobilized to foster it. "Tactically, it was, *How do we maximize this elite skill that he has?*," says Daigneault. Give him the ball, for one. Paul was traded in 2020. Dennis Schröder, another playmaker, was shipped out, too. Later that year in the bubble, the Thunder marveled at how Gilgeous-Alexander could slip through tight spaces. The emphasis shifted to widening them.

An example: Two weeks before the start of the '20–21 season, Oklahoma City traded for Al Horford. What looked like a salary dump by Philadelphia that yielded a first-rounder was, to the Thunder, more. They wanted to see how Gilgeous-Alexander operated alongside a shooting big man. When he arrived, Horford immediately got the mission. "Sam said, 'This is the guy, he's going to be great,'" recalls Horford. "And you could see it. His body control, his strength, his quickness. It was all there."

Even the dark days served a purpose. Pressure-free environments offer the opportunity for a player to be the focal point of an offense. Oklahoma City took some beatings during those lean years. But they played a bunch of close games, too: 35 of the Thunder losses between '20–21 and '22–23 were decided by five points or less, invaluable experience for a developing star.

Among the lessons Oklahoma City learned from its last would-be dynasty was the importance of breaking bad habits early. As successful as those Thunder teams from the 2010s were—you remember them, led by that Durant guy—they could be sloppy. Talent was enough to overcome those flaws, but OKC didn't want to white-knuckle wins again. With Shai, the emphasis



early was on polishing weaknesses. Less dribbling. Fewer contested shots. Making the right reads. It wasn't about the numbers but how he got them.

Presti, who played guard at Emerson College, was schooled in the San Antonio Spurs' system. Information is his currency, and he can't get enough of it. Gilgeous-Alexander is the same. Identify a weakness, he'll fix it. Erratic from three? He'll work until he's pushing 40%. Defenses taking away driving lanes? He'll find new angles to attack. After two postseasons of watching defenses load up on him, Shai spent last summer working on playing off the ball.

The Thunder sought players to complement Gilgeous-Alexander. But the team didn't want to be dependent

on him. It wasn't about building around a singular talent—as, say, Houston did with James Harden—but for that talent to be the centerpiece of a modern NBA roster. Draft capital was invested in versatile, multipositional players. Some picks hit (Chet Holmgren, Jalen Williams). Others didn't (Darius Bazley, Aleksej Pokuševski).

The losing was tough. But not discouraging. Gilgeous-Alexander signed a five-year extension in August 2021. When the inevitable trade speculation surfaced, he told reporters, "I know what I signed up for." He bought into Presti's vision hook, line and jumper. "The way I saw it, I had no choice but to trust him," says Gilgeous-Alexander. "It's not my job to put an NBA team together. You'd probably be better [at it] than I would. So for me, it was just making sure that I'm the best player for his basketball team."

ZACH BECKER/NBAE/GETTY IMAGES



IN 1993, Oklahoma City voters approved its first Metropolitan Area Projects plan—MAPS for short—a temporary sales tax that funded, among other things, the construction of Paycom Center and a convention center across the street. Thirty years later voters approved another tax—this one to usher in the arena’s replacement. Sometime this year construction will begin on a new \$900 million arena, which residents voted overwhelmingly (71%) to foot most of the bill for. “The Thunder,” says Oklahoma City mayor David Holt, “fundamentally changed our identity.”

Holt should know. A lifelong Oklahoman, he remembers the city P.T.—pre-Thunder—before the surge in population, before the flood of outside business interest, before economic diversification. Back then,

TODD OWYOUNG/NBC/BETTY IMAGES



Tunnel of Love

Already adored by local fans, Gilgeous-Alexander charmed Jimmy Fallon on The Tonight Show, giving the host a pregame outfit and showing off his custom kicks.

Oklahoma City’s name was synonymous with the 1995 federal building bombing that killed 168 people. “We were proud of our response,” says Holt. “But you can’t build an economy on that.” These days, any time Holt engages with business leaders, conversations routinely begin with the Thunder.

The predominantly white Great Plains region might seem an odd fit for a Black kid from Canada. Not so, insists Gilgeous-Alexander. Oklahoma City’s small market status is familiar for someone who grew up in the shadow of Toronto. “Hamilton is not Toronto,” says Gilgeous-Alexander. “Just like Oklahoma City is not L.A. It’s people that put in the work every day. That go home to their families. That’s the environment I grew up in.”

Besides, in Oklahoma City, Gilgeous-Alexander can just be himself. Everyday things are just that. Grocery shopping. Dinner with his wife, Hailey. Gilgeous-Alexander is a regular at soccer practice with his 1½-year-old son, Ares. “It’s perfect for me,” says Gilgeous-Alexander. “Everything about it just fits.”

Most of Gilgeous-Alexander’s major life events have happened in Oklahoma. Forget basketball. He became a husband in OKC, marrying his high school sweetheart. In his MVP speech last May, Gilgeous-Alexander thanked Hailey for showing him “what love really meant.”

“My whole life has been closed up with emotion,” says Gilgeous-Alexander. “And it’s hard to be in a relationship

of that sort when you're just so closed off. She's helped me with opening up. With accepting and then knowing what to do with emotions as you open up."

He became a father in Oklahoma. If Gilgeous-Alexander lived an uncomplicated life before, Ares further simplified it. Practice, go home. Games, go home. "He always says, 'Whatever happens during basketball, it's O.K.," says Hailey. "I'll be O.K. because I have you guys and the rest of my family."

Raising Ares has offered an unexpected benefit. "It's made me a better leader," says Shai. "He's forced me to take a step back and look at the bigger picture. Like, if my teammate does something wrong, I'll take a step back and think about how they feel. He's shown me all the things that you think matter in life don't even really matter."

He's built a brand in Oklahoma City. If that seems improbable, remember that all that big market/small market stuff went out in the age of Instagram. These days your reach is as far as your following, and Shai's (4.7 million) is considerable. He notes he has fans all over the world, even in places "I've never bounced a ball." His social profile is a mix of basketball and well-lit fashion shots. He's met designers (Virgil Abloh, Louis Vuitton's first Black artistic director, stands out), walked runways and designed his own sneaker (the Shai 001, which sold out in minutes), all while living in a zip code filled with people comfortable in western boots and Stetsons.

Fashion is just a hobby, Shai insists. "I don't have an end goal," he says. "Just learn, soak it all up and see where I can take it." He started drawing as a kid and fell deeper into it when he got to the NBA. "You have a lot of free time on the road," he says. Nickel traces the passion to Charmaine, with her sleek black outfits and bottomless bag of sunglasses. Charmaine points higher up the family tree to Shai's grandmothers. *Regal* is how Charmaine describes them. "Always well-dressed."

Turning pro in that world, Shai says, will have to wait. "It's a lot of work," he says. He's found inspiration in conversations with designers, discovering parallels

between their creative processes and his own. He finds the pressures strangely similar. "In that world, it's so objective-based," says Gilgeous-Alexander. "Like, do people like it or not? I like to see what people are inspired by, what makes them them. The most credible designers and creators are unapologetically themselves."

As he is. Last spring's playoff run spotlighted not only Gilgeous-Alexander's skills, but also his fits. The black leather, *Matrix*-style jacket he wore in the second round. The Cowichan sweater he rocked in the Finals. The John Lennon T-shirt, the double-knee pants, the Canadian tux. Want to get a rise out of Shai? Walk into the locker room with shoes that don't match your outfit, offers teammate Lu Dort.

Shai sees no obstacles to building an empire in Oklahoma. His affection for the area grew days after winning the title, when he looked out at tens of thousands of fans lining the streets for the championship parade, sweating through 101° heat. "Seeing the pride and the joy that they had in us winning," says Gilgeous-Alexander, "almost as if they were on the team."

He still does plenty of community work in Canada,

SGA'S BROTHER, THOMASI, SUMS UP THE SITUATION:
"IF YOU WERE TO PICK AN NBA STAR TO BE ON THE
THUNDER, THE **PERFECT MATCH** WOULD BE SHAI."

where—in addition to refurbishing basketball courts and visiting children in the hospital—he's on the verge of launching an after-school music program in Hamilton to give kids an outlet for expression. In OKC, he has become a supporter of the children's hospital. With Hailey, he volunteers at a community center that supports autistic kids. Thomasi sums it up well: "If you were to pick an NBA star to be on the Oklahoma City Thunder," he says, "the perfect match would be Shai."

LET'S GET the obligatory stuff out of the way. Yes, Gilgeous-Alexander wants to win more championships. Yes, he would love to win multiple MVPs. Yes, he sees the seeds of a potential dynasty in OKC. Presti's wizardry has so stocked Oklahoma City's rotation

that its two most recent first-round picks, Nikola Topic and Thomas Sorber, have not played a minute. After a loss to the Mavericks in the 2024 playoffs, Presti addressed the team's biggest shortcoming, its physicality, by picking up Isaiah Hartenstein and Alex Caruso. Not only that, but a Thunder team on pace to destroy the NBA record it set last year for point differential (+12.9) could have as many as *four* first-rounders in next June's draft—including one from the Shai deal with the Clippers.

That's great, says Gilgeous-Alexander. But it isn't what fuels him. What does? "Maximizing my potential," he says. Where some saw a near perfect season, Gilgeous-Alexander noted flaws. He didn't think the Thunder played great in the playoffs. He thinks he can be more efficient defensively. He thinks he can do more to understand the "psychological warfare" in each game. Lou Williams, Shai's teammate with the Clippers, once

Fashion Forward

SGA's style gives off serious big-city vibes, but at heart the Hamilton, Ontario, native has always retained a small-town ethos: "That's the environment I grew up in," he says.



told him: *Every possession is a game within a game.* The words stuck. "I was never someone who was like, 'I'm doing this so I can win any championship,'" he says. "My motivation was to do this so that I get to the point where I'm the best version of myself every night."

Surely, that's just humble rhetoric...right? Ring culture has defined the NBA for generations. On *Inside the NBA* Shaquille O'Neal still routinely clubs Charles Barkley with his 4-0 edge in hardware. The most cited reason for a trade demand is a chance to win a championship.

Not Shai. "He doesn't look at the game of basketball like an accolade," says Thomasi. "He looks at it like, *There's little parts of the game that I'm not perfect at yet, and I want to be perfect at them.*" Nickeil says when they talk about legacy, championships never come up. "He's trying to be the best man he can be," says Alexander-Walker. "That's what it comes down to, the push of what do we leave behind for our children, and what we want them to see when they look at us."

So how, exactly, does an MVP get better? It isn't about any specific statistic, though Gilgeous-Alexander is sure he can improve some. Again, it's the game within the game. Like finding ways to conserve energy. At 27, Gilgeous-Alexander can absorb 35-plus minute burdens without sacrificing efficiency. But that won't always be the case. Last summer he studied how Michael Jordan and Kobe increased their post play later in their careers. How LeBron James improved as an off-the-ball cutter in his second go-round in Cleveland. How Jason Kidd transformed from an open floor blur to a 40% three-point shooter. "Your body forces you to do that," says Gilgeous-Alexander. "You want sustained success over a career, you have to be better without the ball."

Sustained success. His eyes widen when he finds the words, as if he spotted a seam to split a double team. That's what he's seeking. If championships follow, so be it. Gilgeous-Alexander was barely a teenager during the Thunder's last rise. "That team had three MVP talents and anybody would have bet the house that they were going to eventually figure it out and win," he says. "But you just never know with life and how things work out."

Maybe. But Shai's pretty close to figuring it out. "I still pinch myself sometimes," he says. "To where I was 10 years ago." His voice trails off. "Growing up you have goals and you write them down and you're like, *I'm going to get this one day.* But way more people do that and don't achieve their goals than actually achieve them. So it's always like a is-this-really-my-life? type of feeling. And I don't know if that'll ever go away." □

MICHAEL PETERSON

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SPORTS ILLUSTRATED
SI.COM





A decade ago, the Olympic
hero shared the story
of his painful mental health
journey with the world.
He has since traveled the globe
as a beacon of **ADVOCACY AND SUPPORT**
for those whose struggles
he understands all too well

BY TIM LAYDEN

PHOTOGRAPH BY
SIMON BRUTY

GROOMING BY
AZURE SCHAFFER

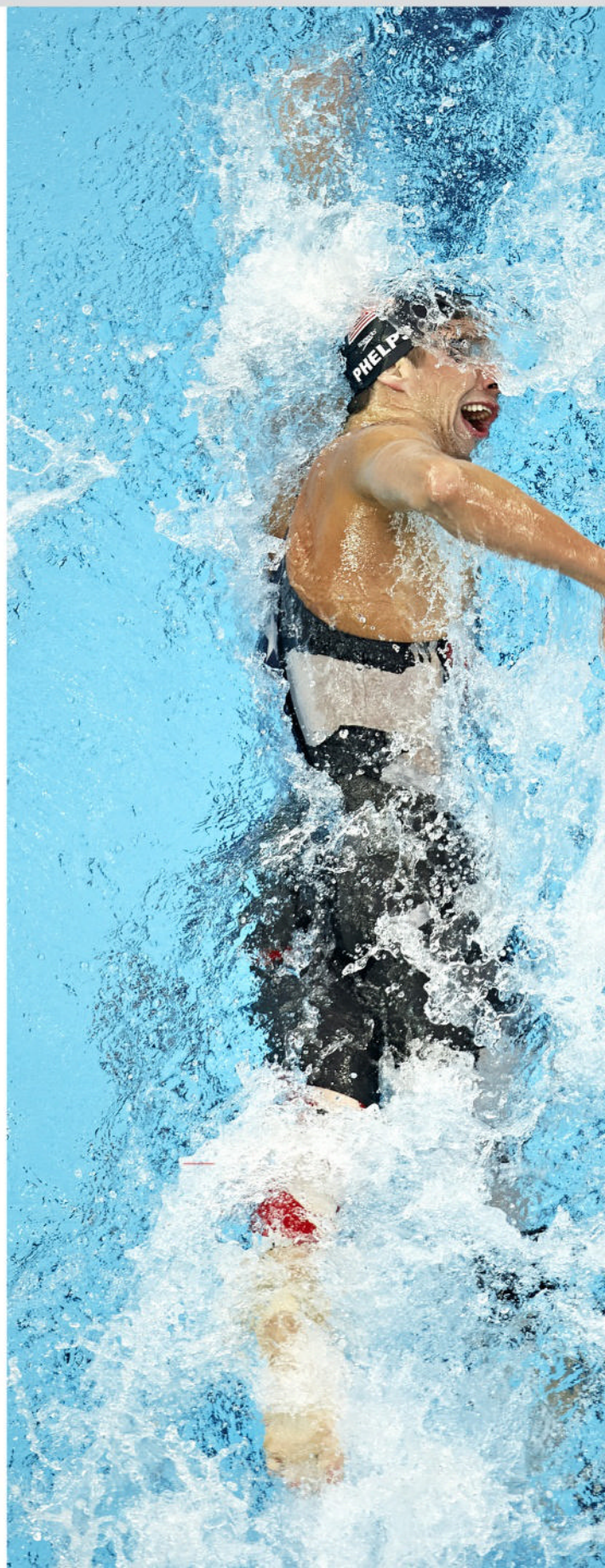


I**N THE** fall of 2015 I went to Arizona to report a story on Michael Phelps for **SPORTS ILLUSTRATED**. It was in one way a dutiful piece: Phelps was already the greatest swimmer in history and already the most decorated Olympic athlete (22 medals, 18 gold—absurd numbers that he had normalized), and here he was already deep in preparation for his fifth and, almost assuredly final, Games.

But the piece was in another way something more. A year earlier Phelps had been arrested in his hometown of Baltimore, driving erratically at 84 mph in a 45-mph zone. He tested as legally impaired and was charged with DUI, excessive speed and crossing double

lane lines. It was his third transgression in a decade of fame (a DWI in 2004 at age 19; and in 2009 he was photographed using a bong and suspended for three months by USA Swimming), but the most troubling, not because of the dangerous speed and heavy drinking, but because he was 29 years old. Youth was no longer a credible excuse. Phelps had announced shortly after the incident that he was entering a residential treatment facility, but shared no specifics as to what led him there or what would be addressed. He returned to swimming in the spring of 2015 and performed near his usual levels. Phelps answered some questions after races, but revealed little.

SIMON BRUTY (2)





In this way, the story I was sent to report contained mysteries, but I had no expectation that Phelps would explain them. Phelps swam a solid morning workout in rising desert heat at the Arizona State pool. He looked good, even more Olympian than usual at age 30, and with his back and shoulders dotted with cupping circles. He was visibly tight and fit. We walked up the street to a café where he liked to eat breakfast; it was crowded, so we sat at a narrow counter facing a window that looked out onto the sidewalk. Phelps ordered breakfast tacos and a pineapple pancake; I got an omelet. It was noisy and I was worried that the chaotic setting and the side-by-side seating were not conducive to intimate or even productive talk. Wrong, as it turned out.

For a while we talked easily about Arizona weather; about Katie Ledecky; about his beloved Baltimore Ravens and his friend, Ray Lewis; eventually about swimming

IT WAS THE BEGINNING OF PHELPS'S SECOND LIFE:
 "AFTER THAT STORY, **I DIDN'T HIDE**
 FROM THE MIRROR ANYMORE."

A Hero's Journey
Feats like winning eight gold medals at the 2008 Olympics (left) made Phelps seem superhuman, but his unsparing interview in 2015 was a study in vulnerability.

and his growing readiness for the 2016 Olympics in Rio. Then the tenor of the interview changed. In dozens of interviews and appearances since that day, as Phelps has become a fierce and unflinching mental health advocate, Phelps has said that I asked him one question that unlocked him, although he can't remember it, specifically.

Phelps was discussing the whole of his year since the incident and said, in summary, "Once I got back to Baltimore, once I had left therapy, I had this different outlook on everything."

According to my transcript of the interview (the recording is long gone), I then said, "What was different?"

Phelps said, "There were a lot of obstacles I overcame, and one of them was my relationship with my father."

And there it was. We talked for another hour, not about swimming (at least not as an athletic endeavor), for two hours the next day, several times on the phone and over text in the following couple of weeks. Phelps

explained the mysteries. He talked about how he “lived in a bubble for a long time.” About the abandonment he felt when his parents split up and his father was mostly gone. About how dismissively he had treated friends and family. About how he contemplated suicide. About how his time in treatment set him on the road to understanding himself as a human being, not just a fast-swimming, gold-medal-winning television character. About all the things that he now fearlessly and publicly identifies as his own battle with anxiety and depression. He freed friends and family members to talk openly with me. “Michael told me I can go ahead and tell the real story,” said Brian Shea, a longtime Baltimore friend.

I wrote a piece that was published in the Nov. 16, 2015, issue of SI with a haunting, shadowy cover image of Phelps, taken by Simon Bruty. Phelps wears a V-neck T-shirt; a thick, unkempt goatee hangs from his chin, his eyes asking for understanding. It is a portrait of vulnerability, a giant stripped naked in the public square.

It was the beginning of Phelps’s second life, of his mission. “After that story, I didn’t hide from the mirror anymore,” says Phelps now, a decade later. “I felt, I don’t know, lighter.” In August 2016, Phelps carried the American flag at the Rio Olympics opening ceremony, the first and only one he attended while competing (because swimming events always commence the next day), and then won five more gold medals and one silver. His totals rose to 23 golds and 28 in all, and good luck to future Olympians chasing those. Then Phelps surged into another world altogether.

In the nine years since those final Games—almost a quarter of his 40 years of life—Phelps has used his name, his legacy and his lived experience to carry mental health awareness and treatment advocacy to the public, fighting stigma and offering empathy to audiences ranging from the thousands he spoke to at a conference

SAYS GLAZER,
“THIS IS NOT JUST
SOME CELEB SAYING
‘OH, I’M DOING
SOMETHING TO
HELP PEOPLE OUT.’
NO. HE’S IN IT.”

in India just before Thanksgiving to the one at a time who approach him in places like grocery stores and ask him for help, and to his work with the online therapy platform Talkspace. “Michael Phelps is an ideal example of how to make a difference,” says Tom Insel, who served as director of the National Institute of Mental Health from 2002 to ’15. “He was one of the first celebrities to speak up.” Others have followed, whether influenced by Phelps or enabled by a more welcoming environment that Phelps helped create, including gymnast Simone Biles, tennis player Naomi Osaka and NBA veteran Kevin Love.

“We grow up in a society that does not speak totally stigma-free,” says psychiatrist Christine Yu Moutier, chief medical officer of the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention. “But that culture is changing, and Michael Phelps has been a part of that change. We are social creatures. We are unconsciously watching and mimicking



those around us. Using your own lived experience story in the mental health and suicide prevention space in the way that Michael has is an enormous force for good. He has been part of a movement of fantastic change.”

For his work in the mental health space, for his tireless—and fearless—sharing of a difficult personal journey, Michael Phelps is the 2025 recipient of SI’s Muhammad Ali Legacy Award, named for Ali, notably in 2015, to honor a current or former athlete who embodies the ideals of sportsmanship, leadership and philanthropy as vehicles for changing the world.

PHELPS APPEARS on screen for a video interview in early December. There is a giant—well, there’s no other way to describe it—*bone*, to Phelps’s right in the frame. It’s impossible not to ask about it. “It’s a woolly mammoth femur,” he



Sources of Strength

As Phelps spreads his message of support around the globe, he faces his own daily demons with the help of his wife, Nicole, and their four young sons.

says. “My wife [Nicole] and I stumbled upon it at a shop in Colorado and decided we needed it for the office.” He smiles as if it seems silly, but O.K. It’s the smile from that cover photo a decade earlier—a man unarmed. He’s only been home a few days from a trip to Australia, where he made three appearances, and India, where he made one.

“It was crazy in Australia, what, 25 years since Sydney [his first Olympics, at barely age 15]?” he says. “Brought back memories. There were some swimming questions, of course, but a lot of parents asking questions relating to mental health and kids and how to help them when they’re struggling.” Phelps and Nicole have four boys under the age of 10, from Boomer, 9, who was sitting on family laps in the Rio Olympic pool seats, watching his dad win those medals; to Nico, not yet 2; with Beckett, 7, and Maverick, 6, in the middle. Like everything in Phelps’s advocacy universe, his boys are part of his learning and sharing. “The emotions are crazy and loud,” he says. “Nicole and I have been able to implement the lion’s breath [a yoga technique], where they just take a deep breath and then they get to roar and scream as loud as they possibly can. It’s a lot. But it lowers the shoulders.”

Phelps pulls off the blue wool cap that’s covering his head to make a point. The brown goatee from 2015 is now a salt-and-pepper beard. His Olympic buzz cut is shoulder length, usually pulled into a ponytail or bun.

It’s a look. A statement. “I’m comfortable looking in the mirror and seeing gray in my beard and a man bun.” Pause. How did he get here? How did the room get so big? “I never thought that story from 2015 would catapult me into this world,” Phelps says. “I never thought it would put me in a position to maybe save a life. But I’ve looked at suicide, thought about it. I know people are going through that. I want to be an example of that vulnerability, and for what asking for help is about. I want people to know it’s O.K. to not be O.K.”

From out of the frame, Nicole hands him a note, citing a 2023 Centers for Disease Control report that determined suicide was the second-most-common cause of death among people aged 10 to 34, significantly more so among males. “Holy hell,” says Phelps. “Second-most common. That’s my biggest goal. Lower that rate.”

His journey has landed him in powerful places. He gave a talk at Microsoft in Redmond, Wash., in 2019, detailing his own life and his own pain. During the Q&A that followed Phelps’s talk, one of the attendees stood and bared himself, in front of hundreds of coworkers. “When I got off the stage, I was literally crying,” says Phelps. “I walked up to him and hugged him and we talked.” Phelps waits. “You know sometimes I feel like I’m on top of a mountain, screaming, and nobody is listening, and then something like that happens, and I’m like, *Holy s---, yes, this is actually helping.*”

On another occasion, at an event sponsored by Fidelity, in Scottsdale, an audience member told Phelps that they had considered suicide but that hearing Phelps’s story pulled them back. They said, “You saved my life.” Nicole says, “That’s *heavy*. But Michael takes it in stride and hugs them and tells them how worthy they are.”

“I can’t tell you how many interactions I’ve had just walking around places like a grocery store,” Phelps says. “Just out in public and people come up to me, vulnerable, and say, ‘I’ve had so many ups and downs and you’ve helped me. Thank you.’ That’s so powerful.”

Phelps’s close friend, Fox NFL personality Jay Glazer, says, “Michael wants to be of service. He wants to be in the trenches. This is not just some celeb saying ‘Oh, I’m doing something to help people out.’ No. *He’s in it.* He’s saying, ‘I’m going to use my pain to help others.’ That’s got to be the greatest accomplishment a man can achieve. I’m so proud of him.”

Bob Bowman was Phelps’s longtime swimming coach; they were inseparable across those five Olympics. Bowman is now the head coach at Texas and the go-to coach for some of the best swimmers in the world, including

Leon Marchand of France and Summer McIntosh of Canada. He and Phelps are frequently in touch; they will talk about the workouts that Bowman writes nowadays and on occasion Bowman will send him a screenshot of some epic training session that Phelps did in his prime and Phelps will respond excitedly: *I remember doing that!* Just as likely, Bowman will bust him about a missed turn. “It’s all still in there,” says Bowman. They are close in a way that evades description, and so Bowman marvels at where Phelps has taken his life.

“It was surprising in the beginning,” says Bowman. “But now? I can see how gratifying it is to him. Especially since swimming is over. He gets going on this, and he seems to really care. I think it’s so important to him because he realizes how it relates to his own life. And I think the more he does it, the better he feels about it, and the more he wants to do.”

Something else: There are ripples to Phelps’s work. Bowman says he never broached the subject of mental health when Phelps was competing, because, he says, “I was just not equipped to deal with it.” But now, as a college and professional coach, “He’s empowered us to start dealing with it.”

Allison Schmitt trained with Phelps, and was among his closest friends, through most of their parallel careers; she won 10 Olympic medals, including four golds. She went public with her own mental health struggles in the spring of 2015, shortly after the death by suicide of her 17-year-old cousin. As Phelps rose and fell, she lived it with him. “Michael really thrives off helping others,” says Schmitt. “I think what he realized, at some point, was...he went through all these years, hurting, and just putting his head down and never being heard. But now he understands, and he hears people that are screaming but don’t necessarily know how to say the words *I need help*.”

And this: “I have seen so much growth in him.”

PHELPS STILL
STRUGGLES
HIMSELF. “THAT’S
WHO I AM,”
HE SAYS. “I GO
THROUGH MY
UPS AND DOWNS.”



THERE IS a catch that raises the degree of difficulty in all of this. Phelps is doing his work for the world while also doing work on himself. He calls it his roller coaster. “That’s who I am,” he says. “I go through my ups and downs.”

Thanksgiving was rough. The house was full for the week, with the boys, with Bowman and Schmitt, with Nicole’s parents. “Holidays for me are always a struggle,” says Michael. “Holidays were never super rah-rah, exciting for me growing up. So as far as the roller coaster goes, these last two or three weeks, it’s just been, *Holy crap*. More like an express elevator going straight down.”

Moutier says, “One thing that can get tricky is when celebrities out their own lived experience, mental health journey or suicide journey, the response can be overwhelming....[They] are not mental health professionals and they’re not necessarily equipped in their own schedules and time. That can become a huge responsibility.”

“I hope and trust that he’s got really wise and supportive people in his life, partners and others, therapists, who can help him navigate, because there may be times when it’s just too much.”

He does. Not just family, friends and therapists. Phelps is part of a text, phone and email group that includes, among others, Glazer, Rams coach Sean McVay,

More to the Story

Phelps’s made-for-TV Olympic moments included his first gold (above, 2004) and hugs with his mom (right), but his success and family relationships were more complicated.

Commanders coach Dan Quinn and movie megastar Dwayne “The Rock” Johnson. “If any of us are spiraling, or if any of us are having a moment, we just hop into the group and honestly, we just hold ourselves accountable, to talk about it,” says Phelps. “To be vulnerable. One of us is always there to pick up the call. Just communicate. Don’t isolate. And I can isolate with the best of them.”

It all unfolds together. Phelps helps himself as he helps others by talking about it, a balance that lends power to his message. His difficult relationship with his father was central to his struggle, and in some ways, still is. His parents, Fred and Debbie, split up when Michael, the youngest of three, was 9. In my 2015 interview with Fred Phelps, he remembered some good times with Michael, whereas Michael remembered mostly not having his dad in the house. It was messy and painful. They reconciled in ’15, but it was never all the way right. Fred died in 2022. I asked Michael, “You guys were good at the end, right?”

His answer: “Uh, yeah, in my eyes, sure.”

But: “I talk about my relationship with my dad all the time,” says Phelps. “It’s out in the open. It’s not something to be ashamed of. It’s not something to be embarrassed about. It’s a chapter in your life that you’ve gone through and that made you who you are.”

He is a father now. With those four boys. On the weekend after Thanksgiving, he found himself still on the downside of the roller coaster. “I just wasn’t doing well, mentally,” says Phelps. He was in the kitchen. “And the big guy, Boomer, he walks up to me and gives me a hug, and just snuggles right in there like a little bear.”

Michael Phelps, Olympic hero, pulls off the skull cap again and shakes his head. “Those little dudes have saved me.”

So that he may save others. □

Tim Layden is a writer-at-large for NBC Sports.



NAT

BREAKOUT STAR / *of the* / YEAR

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RALEIGH



With his 60-home run explosion in 2025, the Mariners catcher joined one of the most exclusive clubs in sports. The **POWER SURGE** may have been sudden and shocking. But this slugger is hardly an overnight sensation

BY TOM
VERDUCCI

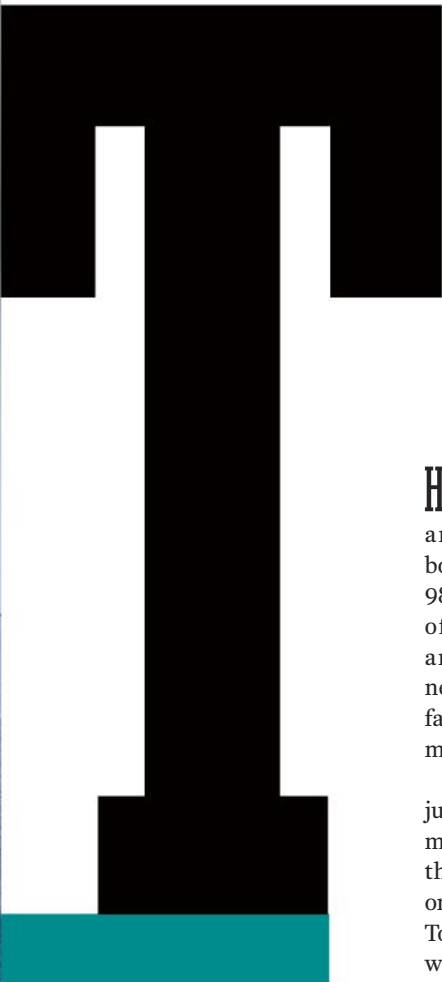
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STEPH CHAMBERS/GETTY IMAGES







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HE PITCH was a low dart, zipping angrily toward the very bottom of the strike zone at 98.3 mph. It was 20 inches off the ground when it arrived. Cal Raleigh had never hit a home run off a fastball that low in his five major league seasons.

Raleigh swung. He knew just what to do, thanks to a man sitting 20 rows behind the plate at T-Mobile Park on this September evening. Todd Raleigh, his dad, was wearing a Mariners cap and, like everybody else in the ballpark, was on his feet on the chance baseball history

was about to happen. Cal's mother, Stephanie, stood next to Todd. Their son was sitting on 59 home runs.

"Nose and barrel," Todd would tell Cal in the batting cages of Western Carolina University, where Todd was the coach and Cal was a bat boy from ages 8 through 10. "Nose and barrel. Keep your nose and barrel as far apart as possible."

"My dad," Cal says, "was always a proponent of extension. Power comes from extension. It comes from staying behind the ball and getting the barrel in front. That's how you drive the ball. That's how you get the ball in the air."

"That was just something he always taught. It's been the key for me and one of my pillars as far as what makes me successful as a hitter."

Batting left-handed against Rockies pitcher Angel Chivilli, Raleigh, a switch-hitter since he started to

walk, connected with the low pitch. He extended so far through the baseball, maximizing the distance between his nose and barrel, that he could no longer keep his top hand on the bat. He held on with one hand as the barrel whipped around and above him. History was on its way to the right-field seats.

NEVER DID baseball see a historic home run hitter emerge the way Cal Raleigh did in 2025. He became the seventh player to hit 60 home runs in a season. He is the first switch-hitter and first catcher to do so and, at 28 years old, the second youngest. (Only Roger Maris, 26 in 1961, was younger.)

Raleigh blew past his previous career high in home runs, 34 in 2024, on the Fourth of July. He also led the American League in RBI, caught the most innings in the league (without a passed ball) and led Seattle to its first division title in 24 years and within one win of reaching the World Series for the first time in franchise history.

Throw in his championship in the All-Star Home Run Derby with its backyard vibe (his father pitched to him and his little brother caught); his Everyman appeal fostered by his humility; his dad bod and a nickname people could not stop saying with a smile on their face—"The Big Dumper," an homage to the ample backside of that dad bod; and Raleigh is the winner of SPORTS ILLUSTRATED's Breakout Star of the Year Award.

"It's a super cool award," Raleigh says. "It's not just a baseball award. It's encompassing all athletes. And there's a lot of great, great ones out there. It's very humbling."

There is something Raleigh wants you to know about what it took to win this award. This was not a one-year breakout. Raleigh was never the chiseled, best-in-show, can't-miss prospect who you expect to be the kind to hit 60 home runs. He is the first drafted player who was not a first-round pick to hit 60, a distinction he wears proudly. This is someone who was cut from his middle school baseball and basketball teams. He was a catcher who was not permitted to hit in his first year of high school ball because the coach used the DH for him, not the pitcher. He was told he was a Division III player, not Division I, was ranked by the Mariners behind 378 players in his draft class, and when he did reach the big leagues he was platooned with Tom Murphy, a career .239 hitter, because the team thought he could not hit right-handed.

“First things first,” Raleigh says. “Those hitting sessions with my dad? They weren’t always great. I think that’s the thing a lot of people always assume—that you’ve always been this really good baseball player, a really good hitter and you’ve always been super talented.

“I don’t think that’s necessarily true. It was a lot of hard work. A lot of time in the cages. It’s thousands and thousands and thousands of balls thrown and drills. It’s learning and relearning. It’s the ups and downs. That’s the cool part about this. I get to share it with my dad.

“My big league career so far and having him in the Home Run Derby is a cool part of it. But what you don’t see are all the failures and tough times and occasions I spent with him that helped me get through.”

Todd Raleigh taught his son how to switch hit as soon as the boy could stand. Cal was still in diapers, between 12 and 18 months old, when his father put an oversize, red plastic bat in his hands and showed him how to grip it. Todd flipped plastic balls underhanded for him to hit. Then he would pick up Cal, turn him around, change his grip and repeat the drill from the other side.

“Never just a day or a week or a year,” Todd says. “It was always the same every day. I never wanted my boys to think in the back of their head they were better on one side than the other.”

Todd played at Western Carolina from 1988 to ’91 and had two stints (1993–94 and 2000–07) coaching the team. The Raleighs lived in the shadow of the school’s ballpark in Cullowhee, N.C., a mountain valley town of 7,300 people and 3½ square miles. Little Cal suited up in a Catamounts jersey as a bat boy. He was in sixth grade when he was cut from the middle school basketball and baseball teams.

“They basically told me not even to bother to try out for the baseball team,” he says. “I was one of the younger ones, but it was a tough year. I look back and a lot of that stuff I’m thankful for now. I even go back to freshman year. I would get hit for. That’s part of it, too. It’s about not getting what you want but learning and growing from it and using it as fuel.”

A college coach told him, “You’re never going to be a Division I catcher. You’re a D-III player.”

Says Raleigh, “You don’t forget those things. Those are the kind of things that drive you.”

Raleigh worked his way to Florida State, where he followed a solid freshman season with a down sophomore year in which he hit .227 and did not play summer ball. Scouts soured on him as he entered his draft year,

2018. That year the Mariners for the first time cooked up a statistical model to evaluate draft prospects. They rated Raleigh at No. 379. But their area scout in north Florida, Rob Mummau, knew that Raleigh had played through an injury to his index finger that sapped his power. It also was the reason Raleigh skipped summer ball. Mummau rated Raleigh’s power as a 70 on the traditional scale on which 80 is the ceiling. Most scouts had Raleigh at 55 or 60 at best. Mummau had gotten to know the Raleigh family well. He filed glowing reports on the .227 hitter.

“I got off to a little bit of a slow start as a junior,” Raleigh says. “Some scouts were writing me off. I ended up coming on strong toward the end of my junior year.”

Washington Heights

For Raleigh, individual success was a bonus on top of what truly made 2025 a magical year: Seattle’s AL West title and a postseason run to Game 7 of the ALCS.



Raleigh had no idea Mummau was pushing him to the Seattle front office when he sat down to watch the first round of the draft. The Mariners finally took him in the third round. Eighty-nine players were drafted ahead of him, including five catchers, starting with the No. 2 overall pick, Joey Bart of Georgia Tech, picked by the Giants. Raleigh signed for \$854,000.

“In the grand scheme of things, I got picked in a great spot,” Raleigh says. “I wouldn’t change it for anything in the world, but right at the time, as somebody getting drafted, you want to go as high as possible.”

RALEIGH MADE his big league debut in the second half of 2021. Over his first three full seasons he hit .222 but also smashed 91 homers, including a 2022 walk-off to clinch a playoff spot, and won a 2024 Platinum Glove as the best defender in the American League. The Mariners saw the value of a switch-hitting, 30-homer catcher with elite defense and signed Raleigh to a six-year, \$105 million extension in March 2025. “They took me in from Day One with kindness and respect,” Raleigh said in a statement upon the signing.

What the Mariners didn’t know they were getting was a 60-homer slugger. Neither did Raleigh. “I know that the power is there and I’m a strong guy and that’s my game,” Raleigh says. “But ultimately my goal going into the season was just to have better at-bats, sneak out another base hit here or there, another walk here or there.

he says. “You learn who you are as a player and you learn an approach and what kind of puts you in the right headspace, mentally and physically, to go out there and put a good swing on the ball.

“So, ultimately, it wasn’t this massive overhaul or physical change. It was just that I was more committed and more locked into my approach than I was in the last couple of years.”

Says Seattle manager Dan Wilson, a former catcher, “What he does behind the plate every day, prepping for games, handling a staff, the wear and tear, the hundreds of foul balls...it’s amazing. Then you add 60 home runs on top of that. Amazing. But what people should know about Cal more than anything else is what drives him: winning. Everything he does is driven by winning.”

The Mariners trailed the Astros by 3 ½ games in the AL West with 21 games to play. Raleigh hit nine home

runs in the next 17 games. Seattle won 16 of those 17 games, the last of which clinched the division title. It was the night Todd and Stephanie were sitting behind home plate in Seattle to watch history arrive.

On his first swing of the night, Raleigh unleashed just about as perfect a swing as he could take. He hit a home run into the upper deck at T-Mobile Park for the first time in his career, joining only seven others who reached those hinterlands in the 26-year history

of the ballpark. It was home run No. 59.

His last swing of the night produced No. 60, a home run made possible only by the distance between his nose and barrel. As he rounded first base and saw the ball go out, he could not suppress the smallest of smiles. He jogged quickly and routinely around the bases, same as always.

Three hits. Two home runs, one in the upper deck, the other No. 60. A 9–2 victory. A division title. Mom and Dad watching him.

“I just remember,” he says, “how kind of perfect the night was. I mean, how much more perfect can it get than this?”

Just before he reached the dugout, Raleigh turned and raised his right arm toward the seats behind home plate, about 20 rows back. Then the son waved to his parents, same as if it were years ago, back at a Little League game in Cullowhee, where 60 all began. □

*THERE IS SOMETHING RALEIGH WANTS YOU TO
KNOW ABOUT **HIS EMERGENCE:**
THIS WAS NOT A ONE-YEAR BREAKOUT.*

“Besides that, my goal was ultimately becoming a better leader. Trying to find a way to slow the game down, help our staff, anything to help us win more games and get into the postseason.”

By June it was apparent that Raleigh was building something special. In one stretch he hit 20 home runs in 37 games. He had 38 homers at the All-Star break.

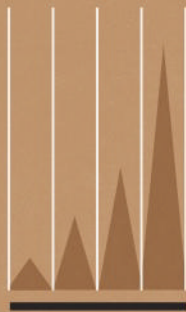
There were no swing changes. No crazy drills. Like a classical pianist, Raleigh had built success on the relentless pursuit of technique. It was all the years of working to create distance between nose and barrel. The most telling leap in Raleigh’s hitting profile can be found in how often he hit balls in the air to the pull side. It jumped from 29.5% in 2024 to 38.4% in 2025, the second highest rate in baseball. When he did hit a fly ball to the pull side, it went out of the park more than half the time (45 of 85 or 53%; the major league average is 38%).

“I think it’s just one of those things where you learn about yourself over the years of being in the big leagues,”



Wanting to change the conversation around women's basketball, the **UNRIVALED FOUNDERS** created a model for any league to build a sustainable business that benefits players and fans alike

BY EMMA BACCELLIERI



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S O
T Y

EARLY IN their careers, feeling out the constraints on the modern female athlete, Napheesa Collier and Breanna Stewart grew familiar with a mindset that could be alternately positive and patronizing. It came up in statements about wanting to support women's basketball, to *do the right thing*. This was generally well-intentioned, and sometimes accompanied by real generosity, too. It just seemed tremendously limiting to WNBA players like them.

"When people see you as a charity, they don't care whether you make money or not," says Collier. "They're doing this for a good cause."

That attitude undercut any drive for the sport to be taken seriously on its own terms. This was personally annoying to the players, of course, but it also felt like a missed opportunity. So eventually Collier pitched her former UConn teammate Stewart on countering that dynamic by creating something new. In early 2023, the pair began pursuing investment for a wintertime, player-led, three-on-three league. And

Double Duty

Unrivaled's founders took the court for their new league: Stewart (opposite, right) and the Mist missed the playoffs, while Collier's Lunar Owls lost in the semifinals.





It's obvious in the viewership numbers and sponsorships that players are seeing off the court. And it's obvious in what Collier and Stewart have created.

When Unrivaled began its first season in 2025, it offered something relatively modest for professional sports, but strikingly ambitious in the context of what players knew from the WNBA. The new league played a short season, from January to March, designed to create a break after the WNBA playoffs wrapped in October while still allowing for some time before training camp began in April. Unrivaled held its entire season in one compact arena outside Miami. But the centralized location and small footprint allowed the league to focus its energy (and money) on the player experience instead. The average salary of \$220,000 was roughly equal to the *maximum* salary for a longer season in the WNBA at the time. All 36 of the inaugural players received equity stakes in the league. They had resources—childcare, treatment facilities, massage rooms—that are unevenly distributed in the WNBA.

Unrivaled exceeded its revenue targets by nearly breaking even in its first year. It announced a \$340 million valuation in September following another round of fundraising, with expansion coming ahead of schedule: Season 2, which began Jan. 5, will see eight teams, up from six. And while the sports' economics continue to change, Unrivaled has framed the discussion about what players can reasonably demand. Collier and Stewart wanted to move beyond the constraints that came with being treated as a social cause. They wanted to see how much women's basketball could grow by treating it seriously as a business.

It's that vision that has made Collier and Stewart **SPORTS ILLUSTRATED's** Innovators of the Year for 2025.

"Unrivaled showed that it's possible," says Collier. "To do it in a way that creates a sustainable business, I think that we really raised the bar for women's sports."

THE QUESTION of what players would do in the WNBA offseason had never felt like much of a question at all. For the money, for the experience and for the skill development, WNBA players generally went overseas and kept playing.

"WE WANTED TO KIND OF BREAK THE CYCLE," STEWART SAYS. "WE'RE GOING TO STAY HOME, AND WE'RE GOING TO BUILD OUR BRANDS."

over the last three years, as they developed the league now known as Unrivaled, they have found the language around the sport changing entirely.

Now, that framework of charity has all but disappeared from women's basketball. This is unquestionably the domain of business—increasingly big business.

That is obvious in the WNBA—now flush with cash from a new \$2.2 billion media rights deal and record expansion fees (Cleveland, Detroit and Philadelphia each paid \$250 million)—where the economics are being reshaped by a new collective bargaining agreement. It's obvious in the development of additional offseason leagues, including the moneyed international outfit Project B, a five-on-five league that will tip off next winter with games to be played around the world.

"You get drafted. Two weeks later, you go to the WNBA, then all of a sudden, you go overseas to China," Stewart says of her experience of entering the league, which she did in 2016. "And you're on this hamster wheel that just keeps happening over and over and over."

There were some variations as the years passed. The top destinations went from China to Russia to Turkey. Stewart became a multiple-time WNBA champion and MVP. But she never felt like she had much of a choice when it came to playing abroad. She could earn seven figures annually in foreign leagues while still not cracking six figures under the pay structure of the WNBA. Her example was something of an extreme one: Stewart's talent put her among the most highly paid players internationally. (And changes to the WNBA's CBA in 2020 pushed the average player salary over \$100,000 for the first time, while simultaneously adding new restrictions on when players had to return to the United States for training camp.) But many of her fellow players felt like they, too, could not pass up the money they would earn overseas, and so they played a calendar that had no true offseason.

It wasn't just about the money. The WNBA season lasted only a few months: The schedule was largely set at 34 regular-season games until 2022, when it gradually began increasing, up to 44 in '25. That still left the majority of the year open for players hoping to grow their skill sets. And playing internationally meant a chance to develop against more varied competition. That could be especially critical to players scrambling for roster spots: There is no developmental league for the WNBA. Any young player looking to meaningfully level up or any veteran hoping to find a way back into the league generally had to prove herself elsewhere.

But spending months overseas could be difficult or sometimes even dangerous. (Collier was in China when the COVID-19 pandemic shut down the world in early 2020. Two years later, when Brittney Griner was detained in Russia for bringing vape cartridges of cannabis into the country, every player reviewed their personal calculus on where to consider playing and for how much.) Even if players felt like they needed the money they made abroad, they found that it came with financial compromises, too: It was hard to establish a meaningful personal brand in the U.S. if they disappeared from view for more than half the year.

In other words, this was a question about player development and marketing just as much as it was a question about money. Collier believed she had something that

could answer all of the above. That would be a winter league that paid them well, let them grow their profile stateside and developed their skills while being less physically strenuous than a full six months of five-on-five. She formulated the idea with her husband, Alex Bazzell, who is now the president of Unrivaled. When Stewart decided that she was in, they were confident that many other players would be, too.

"We wanted to kind of break the cycle," says Stewart. "We're going to stay home, and we're going to build our brands, and we're going to connect with partnerships that normally don't work with women's basketball and show them why they should."

This was something new for both Stewart and Collier. (Neither had been anywhere close to the business school at UConn: "I wish I would have taken some business classes, that's for sure," says Stewart.) They surrounded themselves with experts. For commissioner, they tapped former WTA president Micky Lawler, impressed by how tennis had led the way in higher pay for women athletes. And they found that players, investors and other partners were intrigued by what they had to say.

Unrivaled signed a six-year, \$100 million deal with TNT Sports, the first time the network had secured

"WHEN PEOPLE SEE YOU AS A CHARITY, THEY **DON'T CARE** WHETHER YOU MAKE MONEY OR NOT," COLLIER SAYS.



broadcast rights for women's pro hoops in the U.S. In a pairing that feels too obvious for any other female sports property to have missed, Unrivaled became the first sports league to partner with beauty retailer Sephora, which stocked a glam room, sponsored the entry tunnel where players arrive and now has naming rights to the league's arena. The startup made deals with companies that had existing partnerships with the NBA or WNBA, like Wilson and Ally Financial, and with some that did not, like Morgan Stanley and Wayfair.

Full Service

With an eye on marketability, Unrivaled prioritizes fan engagement both at the games (opposite) and online with the players, embracing each athlete's personal brand.



But none of that would mean anything without the participation of the players. Stewart and Collier had settled on a modified version of three-on-three, using a bigger court than in the Olympics, designed to make the game faster and more dynamic for television. That meant selling players on a version of their sport they had never seen before. Many decided they had enough trust in Collier and Stewart to give it a try. Unrivaled did not land every star—players like A’ja Wilson and Caitlin Clark have limited their schedules to play solely in the WNBA—but its first season featured marquee names like Sabrina Ionescu and Angel Reese. And it offered a space for many others to grow their profiles.

That was partially a matter of what it meant to play on national television for a few extra months of the year while staying in the U.S. It was also a matter of how the players were marketed. Having operations centralized in one location (with most players living in nearby apartments provided by the league) meant nearly unlimited opportunities for social media content. And the available resources gave them a chance to share different stories about themselves. Women's basketball had long seen its

biggest storylines come from players fighting to land what they didn't already have—dedicated practice space, adequate recovery facilities, childcare. But all of that was covered here. What the players shared online could now focus on themselves and their games and teammates.

Unrivaled had positioned itself to tell a very straightforward, coherent story: It was a league created by players, and centered on them, too.

COLLIER AND Stewart readily admit they were lucky to have good timing. What felt like a potentially good idea in late 2022 was a great one when they went public in July 2023 and a glaringly obvious business opportunity by the time they launched last January. But if they were lucky, they were prepared, too. WNBA players had long been told to be patient as they waited for the world to catch up so the game could grow. And so Collier and Stewart positioned themselves to benefit when that finally happened.

“It was like, *Oh, keep doing what you're doing, eventually they'll come around, they'll pay attention,*” Stewart describes the longtime message to players. “Now, we're

empowered. As professionals, we're the best in the world and we know it, and we want to make sure that we use every opportunity we can to show it.”

All of the questions of pay and resources that Unrivaled was designed to answer have already begun to look very different. The WNBA's average salary is expected to increase significantly next year. (Collier and Stewart are both on the bargaining committee for the WNBA players union that is negotiating the new CBA.) A growing number of teams are upgrading their practice facilities and locker rooms. The increasing money in the sport has created another winter league that will soon be competing for elite talent in Project B.

But in all of that change, which they have played a part in, there is also this: None of their conversations are framed as if they're running a charity.

“I'm happy that's not the case anymore, and that we have to prove ourselves,” Collier says. “Because we know that we can back up what we're saying. And it just shows the landscape and how much it's shifted.” □

PHOTOGRAPH BY
JEFFERY A. SALTER

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S O

T Y



CHYNA TAYLOR

SPORTSKID / *of the* / YEAR

A former figure skater, the trailblazing Louisville native is poised to become the new face of hockey—and she's only 16



BY
KIM CURZI

IT WOULD be easy to look at hockey phenom Chyna Taylor's résumé and assume she was SportsKid of the Year material from the start. In 2024, when she was just 15, Chyna was the youngest player on the U-18 national team. That made her the first person from Kentucky to play at the national level in men's or women's hockey. And at the world championships in 2025, she was named best player for her team when the U.S. took home silver against Canada.

At Lovell Academy in Massachusetts, where she lives and trains, Chyna holds the records—boys and girls—for most goals, assists and points by a defenseman. (She had 110 points last year, a total she passed by mid-December this season.) “She’s the best in the country,” says Caitrin Loneragan, the girls’ coach at Lovell. But like any good mentor and coach, Loneragan puts that into a healthy perspective. “But she wasn’t always.”

Chyna grew up playing hockey in Louisville on coed teams and was known for being a great skater, with good edge work and an incredible feel for the ice. Those were things she picked up from figure skating, which she started at age 4, but her hockey skills were underdeveloped. “We recruited her last,” says Loneragan. Once at Lovell, her athleticism—she had a 27-inch vertical leap at age 12—quickly set her apart. By the time she was 14 she was the best player on the best team in the country.

Kentucky isn’t known for turning out hockey players, and Chyna certainly stands out in a sport that is predominantly white. When she spends time at home in Louisville, she says it’s incredible to see the support. Scholarships from groups like the Black Girl Hockey Club and Black Bear Youth Hockey Foundation also demonstrate her community’s pride and belief in what she can do. Only three Black women currently play in the Professional Women’s Hockey League, making Chyna’s visible excellence all the more important as the sport strives to become more inclusive. As she steps into bigger roles and the pressure builds, Chyna’s passion for the game helps tune out the noise. “It can be stressful,” she says. “But I just love to play.” □





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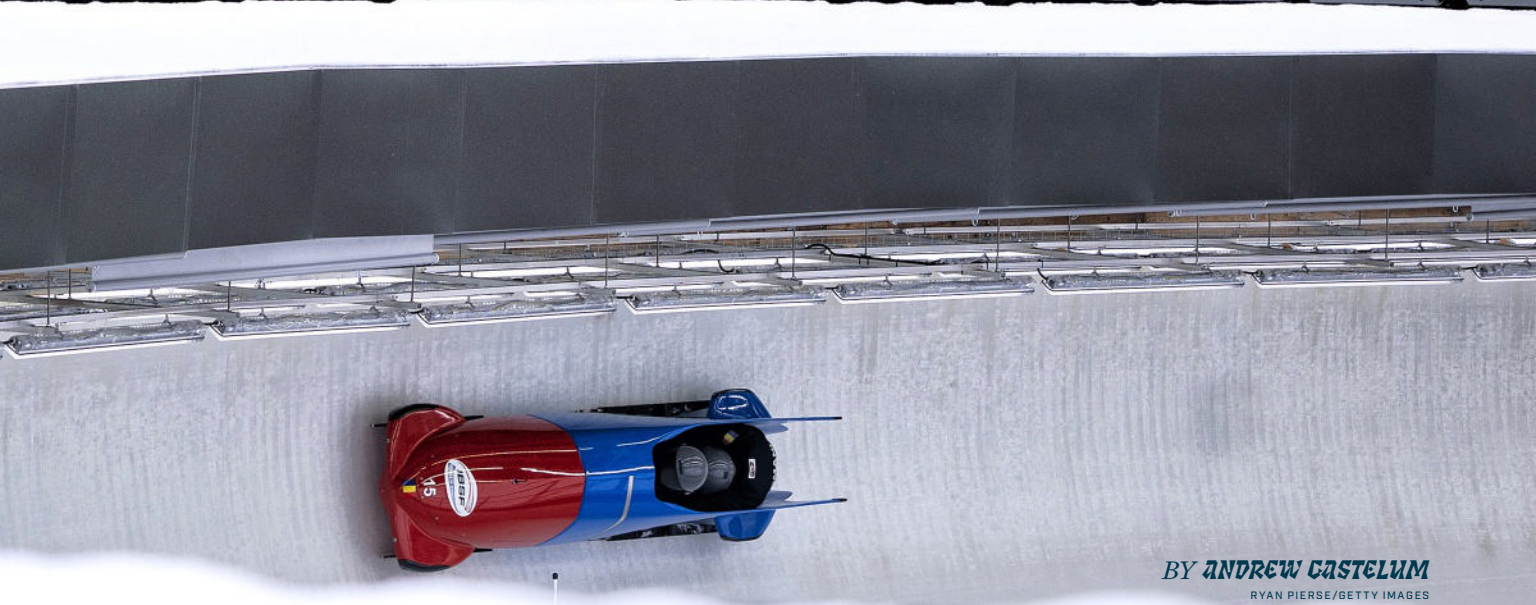
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WINTER Wonderley



MILAN - CORTINA
2026



BY **ANDREW CASTELUM**
RYAN PIERSE/GETTY IMAGES

Milan and Cortina will be the ***FIRST COHOST CITIES IN OLYMPIC HISTORY***,
setting the stage for a diverse 2026 Games that will showcase 116 events and myriad
cultures across nearly 8,500 square miles of northern Italy





*mid-November in Sesto,
a rustic town of nearly 2,000 people
in Italy's Dolomite mountains, and
the cows are still out to pasture.*

Within the week, the first big snowfall of the winter season will blanket the meadows, but for now, everything is rosy—literally, everything.

The haze of the alpenglow seeps into every sight, and it seems to melt upon the Dolomites' pale, jagged peaks. In local legend, the alpenglow is a crepuscular love letter, a dwarf king's tribute to a Dolomite princess, unfurled only at sunrise and sunset.

As in most Italian villages, the heart of Sesto (or in German, Sexten) can be found at the local coffee bar, along with the lone, communal national newspaper to be shared amongst customers. But rather than the usual *buongiorno*, you're greeted with something unexpected: *grüß gott*. This is still Italy, but it doesn't *feel* like Italy.

In Südtirol, Italy's northernmost state, German is the native language. The same goes for Sesto's most revered citizen: tennis star Jannik Sinner. On the newspaper's front page, Sinner shares space with the 2026 Winter Olympics, which will soon dominate the area, with cohost Cortina d'Ampezzo less than 30 miles away. The site of the 1956 Winter Games, the ski resort town also defies the blanket Italian label—nearly 75% of its population knows Ladin, a mix of an ancient Alpine language and the Latin spoken by legions of the Roman Empire that has continued to thrive for centuries due to the Dolomites' isolation. In this northern Alpine region of Italy, pizza is an impostor, beer is often preferred to wine and

the meat in your red sauce is most likely venison. Wielding a chainsaw is as routine a chore as taking out the trash, and kids learn to ski before they can read. Which brings us back to Sinner, who began his athletic career as a junior ski champion and could have been slaloming down the slopes at his home Olympics if not for the fact that he is the owner of four Grand Slam titles.

Sinner, who is anything but stereotypically Italian, will be all over these Winter Games as an ambassador. Sure, he has a pasta, an espresso *and* a Parmesan cheese among his sponsors, but Sinner is not an Italian icon as much as he is a Dolomites legend. He is a bashful star whose humble beginnings can be traced to the shadow of the



Tre Cime di Lavaredo, a spectacular three-headed massif that is the Dolomites' main attraction. Sinner grew up 10 miles from the Austrian border; his first name is bookended with letters that don't even exist in the Italian alphabet. He speaks Italian with a strong German accent. Now, he represents an entire culture—previously trampled upon by both World Wars and the suffocating throes of fascism—that is about to have its moment.

Italy annexed the region when the Austro-Hungarian Empire collapsed after World War I. Within 20 years, Benito Mussolini made every attempt to eradicate Südtirolese and Ladin culture in favor of newly created, homogenized Italian standards. The Südtirolese people were given a choice: Leave for Nazi Germany or integrate as

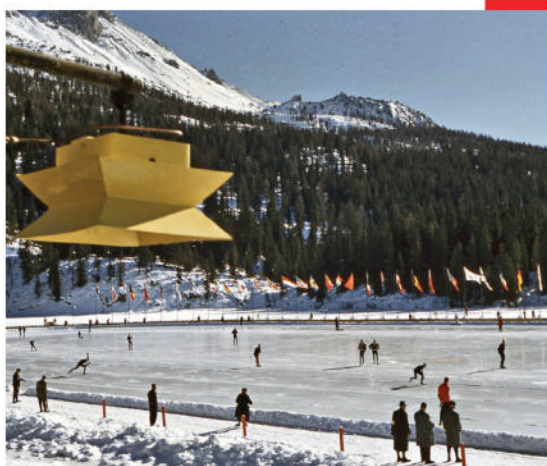
purely “Italian” in the eyes of the fascist regime. German and Ladin were banned in schools and public service, and towns were rebranded with Italian names.

Generations later, the Südtirol region and Ladin people will get a chance to showcase their once-endangered traditions and unique folklore beneath an Olympic cauldron on a global stage, as Cortina d’Ampezzo (or Ampëz, as it was known before being renamed) will cohost the Games with Milan. The 2026 Olympics will offer a rare depiction of Italy as a collage of cultures, rather than the usual red, white and green monolith.

After decades of overcrowding and overspending, packed public transport and post-Olympic

SNOW PLACE LIKE HOME

It’s been 70 years since the 1956 Games in Cortina d’Ampezzo, where speedskating was held outside on natural ice (below).



ghost towns, this, in fact, will be the most expansive Winter Games ever as Milan and Cortina d’Ampezzo are separated by more than 250 miles. Following the pandemic chill of isolation in Beijing and the glorious pageantry of Paris, the theme of these Games is “the more, the merrier,” with events taking place across five clusters dotted across 8,500 square miles of northern Italy.

Rather than forcing events into random venues, these Olympics have bestowed stewardships upon winter havens that already hold deep traditions in the sports they will be hosting: snowboarding along the Swiss border in the party town of Livigno; cross-country skiing in Tesero, through the Predazzo prairies; curling and bobsled in Cortina’s Stadio Olimpico



del Ghiaccio, or Olympic Ice Stadium, originally built in 1954; and biathlon in the stark wilderness of Südtirol’s Rasun-Anterselva, known locally as Rasen-Antholz, where less than 2% of the population identify as Italian.

While the main opening ceremony will be held in Milan at San Siro, the home of two of Italy’s most renowned soccer clubs, there will be three other ceremonies unfolding simultaneously across the mountain regions. This cluster plan could be a model for future Olympics; after all, the next Winter Games have been deemed French Alps 2030.

If this truly is a blueprint, Milan has quite the stage for a premiere. Outside the city’s sky-piercing Duomo cathedral, 221 years after Napoleon crowned himself king of Italy, Olympians will also don gold in front of crowds of adoring fans. Just steps away, Vivaldi concertos will echo across the glass ceilings and mosaic floors of the resplendent Galleria Vittorio Emanuele II shopping arcade. *Armonia*, Italian for harmony, is the motto for these Games and, with La Scala having debuted the operas of Verdi, Puccini and Mozart, it hits all the right notes. The closing ceremony will be held at the Arena di Verona, a nearly 2,000-year-old amphitheater that is both better-kept and older than its near-identical twin in Rome.

These Games coincide with the 70th anniversary of the 1956 Cortina d’Ampezzo Olympics, a turning point in history as it was the first Winter Games to be broadcast internationally on live television. (The technology was so new that speedskater Guido Caroli nearly extinguished the Olympic flame during the opening ceremony when he tripped on a TV cable while skating the torch into the stadium.) Those Cortina Games also marked the last Olympics to hold speedskating and figure skating outside on natural ice, on a frozen-over Lake Misurina with the snow-capped Dolomites looming like stone castles on the horizon.

This month, these scenes and the majesty of the Dolomites will serve as the stage for the winter’s finest competitors once again. And this unique, untraditionally Italian region will provide a fitting backdrop for a much-needed reminder to the world that it can vanquish stereotypes, that diversity can enhance the richness of what we try to label as culture. □

THE 2026 WINTER GAMES
WILL BE ONE OF THE
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GEOGRAPHICALLY, WITH
16 SPORTS HOSTED ACROSS
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WITH ITS OWN UNIQUE
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CULINARY OFFERING

Sciatt (buckwheat fried cheese fritters)

Sciatt (buckwheat fried cheese fritters)

Pizzoccheri (buckwheat pasta casserole)

Pizzoccheri (buckwheat pasta casserole)

Canederli allo speck [bread dumplings with ham, served in soup or with butter and cheese]

Canederli allo speck [bread dumplings with ham, served in soup or with butter and cheese]

Strudel (Austrian apple pastry)

Strudel (Austrian apple pastry)

Casunziei all'ampezzana
[half-moon-shaped beet ravioli]

Casunziei all'ampezzana
[half-moon-shaped beet ravioli]

Tagliatelle alla selvaggina
[venison or wild boar ragù pasta]

Tagliatelle alla selvaggina
[venison or wild boar ragù pasta]

Risotto all'Amarone
[savory red wine risotto]

Risotto all'Amarone
[savory red wine risotto]

Osso buco with risotto alla milanese (braised veal shanks with saffron risotto)

Osso buco with risotto alla milanese (braised veal shanks with saffron risotto)





MILAN - CORTINA
2026

BY MICHAEL
ROSENBERG

VALERIO PENNICINO/
GETTY IMAGES

FIRST

WINTER

> **What goes up** must come down, and that, as much as anything, best sums up the newest addition to the Winter Olympics program. Ski mountaineering sounds like a combination of cross-country skiing and cattle herding, and while that would be awesome, the sport is actually as basic as anything this side of the downhill: First you climb a mountain, then you ski down it.

“Skiing without chairlifts,” says Team USA’s Cam Smith. “Skiing existed for centuries before we had chairlifts. This is how people got around. This is a sport with a lot of history, practicality and participation.”

Smith says that back home in Crested Butte, Colo., “most people around town sort of know what I’m up to.” The rest of the country has questions. Smith is happy to provide answers.

The classic skimo race, which is called the individual, involves a long climb and descent and lasts at least 90 minutes with a minimum elevation gain of 4,500 feet. It is an incredible test of will and skill, of endurance and speed, of... hey! We see you falling asleep over there! This is why the International Olympic Committee will *not* stage the individual at the Milan Cortina Games.

Instead, there will be men’s and women’s sprints, which last around three minutes, held at the Stelvio Ski Centre in Bormio. There will also be a mixed relay, in which one man and one woman alternate going up and down the mountain; they each do two laps and the race should last around 30 minutes. This is a bit like holding a hockey tournament consisting entirely of shootouts, but as the IOC likes to say, *Citius, Altius, Televisare Us*. Skimo will take what it can get.

~~~~~  
**If you** think ski mountaineering is too much of an oddball sport to include in the Olympics, we



MILAN • CORTINA  
2026

The 2026 Games will feature just  
one new sport in the program:  
**SKI MOUNTAINEERING.** The  
IOC’s tradition of experimentation  
has brought us several mainstays,  
as well as a few oddballs

would like to introduce you to something we like to call “the Olympics.” They have *always* been an ongoing experiment.

The 1900 Olympics leaned hard into fun with horses, though perhaps not fun for horses: Polo was a sport, and horses competed in the high jump and long jump (but sadly, not pole vault). The first few Summer Games featured Basque pelota (similar to racquetball), jeu de paume (a form of indoor tennis) and croquet; clearly, the IOC’s motto at the time was “Let’s sound as French as possible.” In 1904, the IOC grabbed a fencing sabre and sliced two letters off croquet; it was replaced by a similar game called roque.

Every Summer Olympics from 1904 to ’20 included tug-of-war, and one of the great mysteries of the universe is why the IOC has not brought that back.

When the Winter Games debuted in 1924 in the French Alps, the slate was, weirdly, not weird at all: Athletes competed in speedskating, cross-country skiing, bobsled, hockey, curling, ski jumping, figure skating, Nordic combined and military patrol, which was basically the biathlon. All nine sports will be contested at these Games, though after the 1924 Olympics, the curlers all went out for a beer and did not return for a medal until ’98.

If you were forced to winnow the Summer Olympics down to one sport, track would be an easy choice, and in the winter, it would probably be Alpine skiing. But Alpine was not an Olympic sport until 1936. Athletes at the first three Winter Games could win medals by jumping off a mountain, but not by skiing down it.

The IOC’s love for sliding events is overpowering, but we’re afraid that even those periodically disappear. Before the 1960 Olympics in Squaw Valley, Calif., organizers decided that there were not enough countries interested in bobsledding, so they did not build a track. The IOC made up for this the next time around by bringing back bobsled and welcoming luge.

Skeleton, the only sport named after competitors’ worst-case scenario, was introduced in 1928. It vanished until ’48. Then it vanished again. For the 2002 Olympics, IOC leaders embraced flying headfirst down a track again, and added what might be their favorite event: bribery.

IOC leaders’ second-favorite event: adding more events.

The first Winter Olympics hosted in northern Italy, in Cortina d’Ampezzo in 1956, featured 24 events across eight sports. The next one staged in the country, in Turin in 2006, featured 84 events across 15 sports. This year, there will be 116 events across 16 sports. Two entities in particular have

## MOUNTAIN MAN

*Smith, an 11-time U.S. champion, is the most seasoned and decorated American in the sport.*

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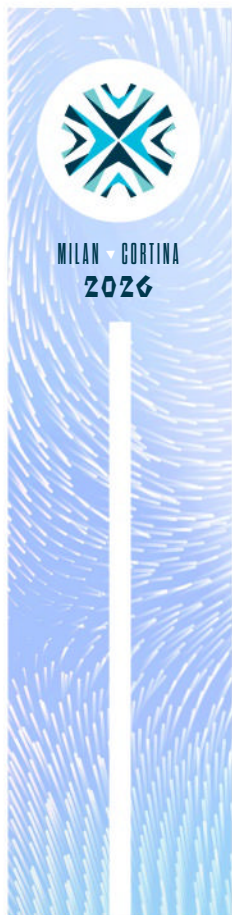
benefited from the expanded program: NBC, which needs 17 days of entertainment; and the U.S., where NBC is based.

The U.S. has produced many of the biggest stars in the newest sports, from short-track speedskating (Apolo Anton Ohno) to snowboarding (Chloe Kim, Shaun White). At the 2022 Olympics in Beijing, the U.S. won 25 medals. Twelve of those came in nontraditional sports (snowboarding, freestyle skiing); two more in the debut of monobob; and the last one in the figure skating team event, which was awarded in Paris in 2024 after the Court of Arbitration for Sport finally finished investigating the Russians for doping.

Say what you want about skimo, but it is definitely not an excuse to spoon-feed medals to Americans. North America received one skimo quota spot in the Olympics; Smith and Anna Gibson will represent the U.S. after winning gold in the mixed relay World Cup in December. Europeans dominate the sport, in part because







many European militaries have ski mountaineering teams. The U.S., on the other hand, has the Army-Navy football game. To each their own.

**Smith** grew up in Rockford, Ill., and learned to ski in Galena, in the northwest corner of the state, at an upside-down ski resort: “You park at the top and then ski down the bluffs to the Mississippi River,” he says. “There’s lots of netting down there so that you don’t slide into the mile-wide river.”

Smith didn’t get into skimo until he moved to Colorado in 2014. He has since emerged as the sport’s premier American male competitor, for reasons he is still trying to understand himself.

“You want to say, like, ‘Oh, well, I just put more work into it,’” Smith says. “But even if that’s true, there’s lots of people that are very, very close to that level of commitment. But for whatever reason, I’ve had more competitive success than anyone else competing right now [among U.S. men]. There must be something that I have that other people don’t.”

There is no skimo archetype. Bodies that are perfectly built for climbing up a mountain are not necessarily ideal for skiing down one. The sport does require exceptional stamina. During

one training stretch in France, Smith climbed a 12,000-foot mountain, then skied down it every day for seven straight days.

Unlike in Alpine events, athletes compete simultaneously in skimo, and the transition from up to down is crucial, especially in the shorter events that will be held in these Games: “They will go from the ascent, to ripping their [climbing] skins off, putting them away and starting the descent in less than 10 seconds,” says U.S. Skimo head of sport Sarah Cookler. With so many competitors rushing and vying for position, transitions can get dicey; Smith preps his brain for precise movements under pressure by learning a new juggling trick in the week leading up to a race.

Every new Olympic endeavor draws skepticism, some of it well-founded. The IOC has tried to introduce ballroom dancing and, at the Paris Games in 2024, breaking. But you never know what might stick or where.

Beach volleyball and short-track speedskating started as curiosities and are now Olympic staples, while baseball and softball have been shelved. For the first half of the 20th century, Americans had moderate success in figure skating. Since then, the U.S. has won more medals in the sport than any other country.

The mixed relay is not usually skimo’s biggest event. But it could be what keeps skimo in the Olympics.

“I think it’s going to be great for television,” Smith says. “You’re going to see teams with stronger women and [other] teams with stronger men, kind of moving back and forth. It’s going to be really dynamic racing with lots of passing, lots of drama.”

If skimo fails to entertain—and really, even if skimo succeeds in entertaining—the IOC will find more sports to add. It always has and always does. On that note, we pass along this vow from U.S. bobsled-der Elana Meyers Taylor: “As soon as I pass the finish line, I’m getting me a cannoli.” We’re not saying that the mixed bobsled-and-cannoli-grabbing relay should be an Olympic event...but if it were, we would watch. □



## THE CLIMB

*In the mixed relay, which has a longer course than the sprint, the woman competitor will start the race for each team.*



**Ski  
Mountaineering**

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**CHLOE KIM**

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***SNOWBOARDING  
HALFPIPE***

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***PHOTOGRAPH BY  
KOHJIRO KINNO***

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**T**



# ON HER

~~~~~ BY *MICHAEL ROSENBERG* ~~~~~

OWN

ERMS

After more than a decade in snowboarding's spotlight, the 25-year-old enters her third Olympics with a **NEW PERSPECTIVE** on what it means to love her sport—and herself



Chloe Kim has picked out the date she will retire from snowboarding. She won't reveal exactly when it will be, but says she's had it in her mind for a really long time.

"I am 25 right now. I'd love to start a family. My mom had me when she was young. I'd love to be a young mom," she says. "My dad's 70 right now. There's so much time, but also not enough time."

A two-time Olympic gold medalist and three-time world champion, Kim speaks like somebody who has checked off her entire to-do list—even the retirement speech: "I've won every single competition multiple times—some multiple, multiple, multiple times. I've done tricks that I never thought I'd be able to do. I have done so much here. I'm really happy and I'm fulfilled."

Athletes are so famously bad at walking away that every unretirement announcement should begin, "I am a cliché." Leaving is hard for a host

of reasons. Even the oldest pro athletes would be considered young in almost any other field; they want to keep working. Then there is the final-scene conundrum: They don't want to go out with a bad performance, but if they are performing well, why retire?

Besides, who can give up that life? The adrenaline rush of competition, private jets and VIP access, cheers in the arena and recognition everywhere else ... it's one high after another. Every month, it seems, an athlete announces their retirement, with fans not even realizing they were still playing—because they weren't. They just hung onto the idea they might play for a year or two after their last game.

Yet here is one of the best snowboarders in history, still in her prime, two months before heading to Italy for her third Olympics, saying she knows when she will retire, and she will not waver.

"Once I set my mind to something, then that's that," she says, "and that's how it's gonna be."

Chloe Kim is sleeping in an airport. She is 10 or 11 years old, and she knows the deal by now. When she travels for a snowboarding competition, she and her father, Jong Jin Kim, buy cheap standby plane tickets; sometimes they get seats right away, but sometimes they have to wait a long while. People who can't afford regular seats on the plane don't spend money on hotel rooms. So the Kims sleep in the airport, sometimes for two or three nights in a row.

The travel arrangements, the homeschooling, the early morning wake-up calls to make the hourslong drive to practice every weekend—it was all part of the plan to make snowboarding a full-time career. And it didn't take long for it to happen.



United States
Snowboarding

CHLOE KIM

SPORTS ILLUSTRATED 70



MAJOR MOVES

After back-to-back wins in PyeongChang (left) and Beijing (opposite), Kim looks to match Shaun White's Olympic record of three halfpipe golds in Milan Cortina.

As an eighth-grader at the 2014 Winter X Games in Aspen, Colo., a 13-year-old Kim challenged 30-year-old star Kelly Clark with her big-time tricks, namely a frontside 900, to come within 0.67 points of the superpipe crown. Kim won silver, becoming the youngest medalist in the event's history. She actually qualified for the 2014 Winter Games in Sochi, but she was two years too young to meet the Olympic snowboarding age requirement.

After that, things happened fast: Kim became such a prodigy that she made six figures in a niche sport before she reached high school. She turned everything upside down with ease: herself, her sport and even the American dream. Her parents emigrated from South Korea in search of a better life, and she made it happen for them.

At age 13, her father sat her down and explained the difference between spending and investing, and not long after, Chloe bought her first piece of real estate: a condo near Mammoth Mountain in California.

She never attended high school. She enrolled at Mammoth High, with plans to attend classes in person when she was in town, but she was never there. She was homeschooled from middle school. Every year, she traveled up to Mammoth from her family's home in Torrance, Calif., when the snow hit, usually in November, to start training. The halfpipe was built around Thanksgiving. She would travel to competitions all winter; take a week off; go back to Mammoth for spring camp; take another week off; spend a month at Mount Hood in Oregon ... and then go to New Zealand for a month or two, and Switzerland for a month and a half, and suddenly, it was almost November again.

It was a lot for a young teenager, but she loved it. Didn't she love it?

Chloe Kim can't see. It's 2019. Yesterday, she had 20/20 vision. But she woke up today and everything was a little blurry. She starts to panic. She thinks she must be dehydrated, and so she has someone come give her intravenous fluids, but after those kick in, she still can't see—not like she did the day before. She wishes she had taken advantage of her last day with clear vision.

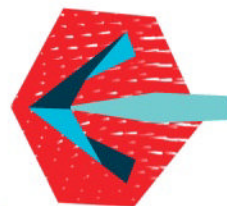
She thinks to herself: *If I knew what would*



MILAN CORTINA
2026



*In the summer of 2024, Kim committed to **INTENSIVE THERAPY**: “I feel so much better now.”*



happen, I would have done so much more the day before. Or I wouldn't have gone to sleep that night. Maybe it was the sleep that got me.

A year before, in PyeongChang at age 17, she dominated her first Olympics, becoming the first woman to land back-to-back 1080s at the Winter Games. In her celebratory press conference, she said, “This is the best outcome I could ever ask for...just going home with the gold is amazing.”

Then she went home as a sudden celebrity—she embarked on a media tour, graced the cover of *SPORTS ILLUSTRATED* with her dog, Reese, and was even honored with her own Barbie doll—and soon fell into a deep depression. The 2018 Olympics outcome was not an outcome at all; for Kim, it felt like a day that refused to end.

She wanted to be satisfied, but she wasn't. She didn't want strangers to recognize her, but they did. She would sleep for 10 hours and wake up exhausted, with no desire to go outside. But she was restless, so she went outside anyway.

About a year after the PyeongChang Games, in March 2019, Kim fractured her ankle during the halfpipe finals at the Burton U.S. Open. The injury required surgery and forced her out of competition for the season—a compulsory pause in her career that eventually led to a voluntary one. That fall, Kim enrolled in Princeton and stepped away from snowboarding for about 22 months before returning in January 2021.

Despite the break from competition, her vision never improved. She hoped it would get better, but she didn't try to fix it. She told herself she was a lousy candidate for contact lenses because of her dry-eye syndrome.

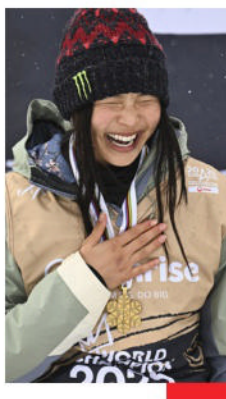
Night competitions, a snowboarding staple, became a challenge: “When I'm competing in the dark with all the lights,” she says now, “it



United States
Snowboarding

CHLOE KIM

SPORTS ILLUSTRATED 72



PODIUM PRO
Kim kicked off 2025 with her eighth X Games superpipe gold (top), then earned a third world title (above and opposite) to clinch her spot on the U.S. Olympic team.

feels like I'm at the club." Her coach, Rick Bower, thinks it affects her more on overcast days when the sun is bright.

But she says snowboarders don't need to see everything perfectly: "As long as I have an idea of what's what I'm looking at, I think I'm good."

And that's that.

Chloe Kim is not worried about pressure, O.K.? She acts like it does not exist. She is the best snowboarder in the world, and today, at the 2022 Beijing Olympics, she walks out for her last practice before the final, and that's when she loses it.

She is shocked. Her coach is not. Bower has coached less famous Olympians who denied there was pressure until it became undeniable, and Kim competes in a stratosphere where gold is assumed.

She falls on the last two of her three runs in the final, but her first one is good enough to win halfpipe gold, the second of her Olympic career. A relieved Kim cracks jokes in her press conference and admits to a little doubt, but she says has

been prioritizing her mental health. She wants little girls who watch her "to learn that it's O.K. to have a bad day." Then she goes home and has a slew of them.

"I hated myself," she says now. "I was so angry at everything. I wasn't treating the people in my life right. I just wasn't the person I wanted to be. I was not good. Difficult, disrespectful—all of it."

At the time, people closer to her suggested she find a therapist, and it infuriated her.

"I'm pissed because it's like, people that I'm working with that are telling me this stuff, you know?" she says. "I'm like, 'Yeah, I probably do need therapy, but I need therapy because of *you*. Because *you're* making me busy, and *you're* not giving me time, and *you're* not prioritizing my rest, and *you* just want to make money.' I hated that. I hated that idea."

In the summer of 2024, after dabbling in therapy for years without much improvement, Kim fully committed to it: "Intensive therapy," she says, "and I feel so much better now." Today, she can make sense of what happened in 2018 and '22—and of her other 23 years on Earth as well.

"The minute you don't let a kid be a kid, that's when they're not gonna be happy. The minute I started feeling more responsible financially for my family and whatnot, that's kind of when the pressure started to build," she says. "When it started to become rewarding, and I started to be on programs and win all these medals, it got even more extreme. I was like, *O.K., well, I have to do all these things.*"

Ah, but she loved it. Didn't she love it?

Chloe Kim sits on a couch and starts talking. Los Angeles, December 2025: She was just in Utah for a video shoot, and now it's an SI interview and photo shoot, and she is having a bad allergy day, and she is "not, like, super fond of public speaking ... I don't think I could ever see myself doing a TED talk." Twenty minutes into the interview, she realizes that she is still wearing her sunglasses.

"I'm sorry, I forgot I had these on," she says. "I was like, *Why is it so dark?*"

She removes the shades. Her eyes hold the first clues that she has already gotten started on the rest of her life: contact lenses.

"Today is actually my first day trying them out," she says. "So far, so good. [But] I think my right one might be inside out."

After waking up that day in 2019 with blurry vision, Kim refused to address the issue for years, viewing it as another annoying thing she didn't want to happen. She was eventually diagnosed

with an astigmatism—a common, easily treatable issue—and finally realized that dealing with it was something she should do, for herself. She learned that dry-eye syndrome was not the obstacle she imagined: The first time she tried to wear contacts, she put them in with ease.

Kim also recently discovered that she has attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder, but again, she refused to face it and deal with all of the ways it impacts her life and snowboarding career. The ADHD is why, according to Bower, she has “no cruising days, no mellow days. They are all very intense.” And it is why she is constantly looking for new tricks.

“She doesn’t go out there and waste a moment on the snow,” Bower says. If Kim takes too long to perfect a trick, she gets annoyed. When she does perfect it, she pushes to add another. “She honestly is bored unless she’s doing the most demanding thing she can,” he adds.

Even away from snowboarding, Kim says her ADHD is “debilitating.” She loves to visit art museums but: “Next thing you know,” she says, “it’s been five hours, and I’m like, *What did I see again? I don’t remember.*” She reads pages of a book at a time on autopilot: “I get distracted,



Jacket by DUNST
Tank by SKIMS
Shorts by THE FRANKIE SHOP
Tights by WOLFORD
Boots by SCHUTZ

EYE-CATCHING

Kim has clarity of both sight and mind: She recently started wearing contacts to address a vision issue.

WINTER WATCH LIST

BY
LAUREN
GREEN



JORDAN STOLZ

United States • Speedskating

The reigning World Cup champion in the 500, 1,000 and 1,500 meters, the 21-year-old Wisconsin native is the favorite for gold in all three events in Milan.



TESS LEDEUX

France • Freestyle Skiing

A big air silver medalist in the 2022 Games, the 24-year-old finished the '24-25 World Cup season as slopestyle champion and runner-up in big air.



MIKAELA SHIFFRIN

United States • Alpine Skiing

The 30-year-old, two-time gold medalist earned her 100th World Cup victory last February following a crash that kept her off snow for two months.



NIKA PREVC

Slovenia • Ski Jumping

The 20-year-old is the reigning world champion and current women’s ski jumping world record holder, achieving a 236-meter flight last March.

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: KOJIRO KINOGI; AUGUSTIN AUTAMAYOU/ANGELICUS/GETTY IMAGES; LENA SHAW/GETTY IMAGES; MADONN KAYE/GETTY IMAGES; ANDREW MARR/GETTY IMAGES; INTERNATIONAL SKATING UNION/GETTY IMAGES

or I really get sucked into this story, and then I forget what happened.”

She is doing what her brain wants, but not necessarily what she wants. For years, she really wanted to train less but she told her herself: *This is what everyone else is doing*. She set out to win snowboarding competitions. She inadvertently created a world she cannot escape.

All the while, she worries that snowboarding will wreck her body.

“My sport is dangerous. People have died. People have had terrible injuries that have, you know, taken away from their quality of life,” she says. “I’m always afraid of CTE. Every time I hit my head, it scares me.”

Her coach says: “Fear gets in the way of a lot of people. She’s as close to fearless as you can be. She is not afraid to do anything.”

Chloe Kim is a wealthy, wildly successful 25-year-old. She has a million Instagram followers and her own line of snowboarding gear and full portfolio of endorsements, and her dating life is news (in late 2025, she went public with Cleveland Browns star Myles Garrett). But she still wonders what it would’ve been like to have

her own locker in a high school, or to go to prom.

“I wouldn’t call myself a celebrity. I never will,” she says. “I literally snowboard. Like, whatever.”

She says her retirement date gives her “a lot of peace.”

Perhaps it has also given Kim a clear vision as she pursues history at the Milan Cortina Games, where she will attempt to become the first athlete to win three consecutive Olympic gold medals in the halfpipe.

Does she still love it? Yes, she says, which means she loved it in the first place. Maybe that is why she mastered unprecedented tricks at great risk to her health, and why she executed them under pressure: As she lost control of her world outside the halfpipe, she clung like hell to what was still hers inside it. *She’s as close to fearless as you can be.*

“The drive and the determination,” she says, “I think that’s what always made me feel alive.”

The first time Kim went to the Olympics, she won gold and felt miserable. The next time, she felt miserable and won gold. Whatever happens in Milan Cortina, she will leave knowing how to not be miserable. That’s that—the best outcome she could ask for, and that’s how it’s gonna be. □



MILAN · CORTINA
2026

AS THE 2026 WINTER GAMES UNFOLD ACROSS NORTHERN ITALY’S
SLIDING TRACKS, ICE RINKS, HALFPIPES AND SNOWY MOUNTAIN TOPS
HERE ARE EIGHT WORLDWIDE STARS POISED FOR THE PODIUM



JESSIE DIGGINS

United States · Cross-Country Skiing

The 34-year-old is the U.S.’s most decorated in her sport after her historic team sprint gold in PyeongChang 2018, and silver and bronze in Beijing ’22.



MARCO ODERMATT

Switzerland · Alpine Skiing

Owner of the overall World Cup title from 2022 to ’25, the dominant 28-year-old looks to build on his Olympic gold in the giant slalom in Beijing.



KAYSHA LOVE

United States · Bobsled

The former collegiate sprinter edged out Germany’s Laura Nolte and U.S. teammate Elana Meyers Taylor to earn the 2025 world title in the monobob.



SCOTTY JAMES

Australia · Snowboarding

The 31-year-old won a bronze medal in PyeongChang—the first hardware for an Australian snowboarder—and a silver in Beijing.



MILAN CORTINA
2026

SIMPLY

BY *STEPHANIE APSTEIN*

PHILIP FONG/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

521



Kline

ILIA MALININ

FIGURE SKATING



A two-time world champion who has gone undefeated for two-plus years, the history-making 21-year-old is **REDEFINING THE LIMITS** of his sport, perfecting nearly impossible skills no one else can complete and paving his way towards Olympic gold



Ilia Malinin doesn't quite understand the question. How has the pressure he feels changed as he has gone from incredible to inevitable, from wunderkind to world champion?

He ponders for a bit. "I just feel a lot more confident when I step on the ice," he says eventually. "And I think that comes with practice and training. I'm able to go out there under pressure and really just give it my all."

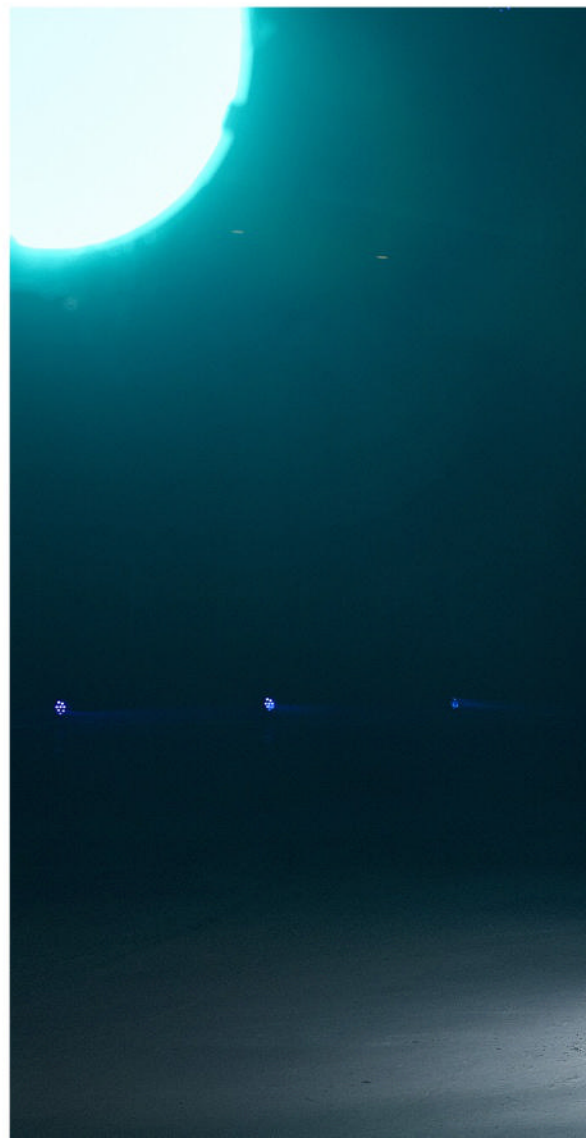
Malinin, 21, sees the added expectations as a natural result of his performance. He can't even conceptualize the idea that they might be a burden.

He was like that long before he became figure skating's Simone Biles, a sui generis athlete whose technical ability is so far above that of his competitors that, barring a devastating mistake or injury, he is guaranteed to win. Even as a grade-schooler, competing in his first events after

picking up the sport of his Olympian parents at age 7, he struggled to understand why other kids were so anxious before they skated. Didn't they feel the freedom on the ice that had attracted him to this pursuit?

"I work with so many skaters," says his agent, Ari Zakarian. "High-quality Olympic champions, world champions, and I've been there for more than 30 years. And Ilia is exceptional. I've never seen anyone like him. He's incredible. His mind is completely different. He's not like a new generation. He's like a future generation from space."

Malinin has not lost a competition since November 2023, when he finished second in the Grand Prix de France. Since then his wins include two straight U.S. and world championships. In a sport in which the margin is often fractions of a point, Malinin opened this season by crushing the field by 20.74 points at the Challenger Series



JUSTIN JAMES MUIR



United States
Figure Skating

ILIA MALININ

SPORTS ILLUSTRATED 78

Lombardia Trophy despite wobbling a few times and ditching his quadruple Axel. A month later, he won the Grand Prix de France by more than 40.05 points, then explained he was coming to terms with “not [being] at my best shape so early on.”

Two weeks later, when he broke his own free skate world record at Skate Canada—in a performance that included the first time an athlete had cleanly landed five different quad jumps in a single program—Malinin all but shrugged. “It wasn’t perfect, and there’s always more to add to the program,” he said. “So I know that hopefully that record can be even higher.”

In early December at the Grand Prix Final in Nagoya, Japan, Malinin beat his own free skate record by almost 10 points en route to a gold-medal finish, becoming the first skater to cleanly land *seven* quad jumps in a single program.

And he did it all despite an injury that he says

MARVEL ON ICE
Malinin is primed for the Olympic podium thanks to his technical ability and inimitable performances.

threatened to keep him out of the Grand Prix season altogether, although he declines to elaborate on what that was. “I don’t want to be too specific,” he says. “My legs weren’t feeling the way I want them to.” There is, of course, no defense in figure skating; his opponents can’t do anything with information about his condition. But there might be some gamesmanship. “I usually just don’t like saying what I’m dealing with most of the time,” he says. “Especially this season.”

Anyone who has followed figure skating even loosely has a sense of what Malinin is dealing with. Four years after missing the Beijing Olympic team in a controversial decision, he is the favorite for gold at the 2026 Games by kilometers. As his top competitors attempt three or four quadruple jumps per program, the self-styled Quad God regularly nails six and is aiming for seven in Milan Cortina. He debuted his quad Axel more than three years ago, at 17; he is still the only person in history to have completed it. (“I’m so honored that we were here in the building,” two-time Olympian Johnny Weir said on the broadcast the second time Malinin hit it. “It’s like seeing the moon landing.”) When he won his second straight world title, in March, he collapsed—not in joy at the accomplishment but in frustration that he missed his fifth of seven attempted quads. (That he hit the quad Axel did not even merit mention by this point.) “It wasn’t the skate I would have liked,” he lamented afterward, gold medal dangling from his neck.

Winning is no longer enough. He expects to make history every time he takes the ice.

In some ways, it seems too simplistic: Talented kid fails to make the 2022 Olympic team, redoubles his efforts to achieve revenge and prove everyone wrong, becomes best in the world.

“Well, yeah,” he says. “I wouldn’t say out of pure revenge. I would say it was more kind of like, *O.K., let me change the world of skating*. After that, I did the first quad-quad combination on social media, then landed the first quad Axel, then started [breaking] all of these records. That’s where the whole Quad God origin story started.”

Two months before the selection committee left him home, he was already expecting to be excluded. He was 17 years old, only two years into his junior skating career, and because he had missed the 2021 U.S. championships with an injury and the pandemic had cancelled the junior Grand Prix season and junior world championships that year, his résumé was thin. On the eve of the ’22 U.S. championships, from which the Beijing Olympic team would be named, Malinin





MILAN • CORTINA
2026

was seen as the future of U.S. men's figure skating—but the distant future. When he aced his four-quad free skate and finished second, perhaps no one was more shocked than he was. “I definitely wasn’t expecting to skate this good,” he said afterward. “Even though I’ve been training for this moment, I was really surprised on how easy things came.”

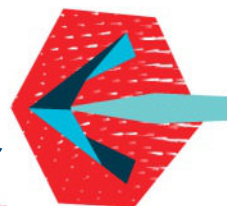
The performance meant that he was eligible to be considered for the three-man U.S. Olympic team, along with six-time national champion Nathan Chen, who had won the event; Vincent Zhou, who placed third; and Jason Brown, who finished fourth. Malinin clearly exhibited the most potential, but Zhou and Brown were both former U.S. medalists and Olympic veterans. Suddenly everyone around Malinin was talking about his high-scoring ceiling, how he might have a chance to win a medal for the U.S. if the committee focused on peak performance rather than overall body of work.

“They said they can send a person just to get that experience for next time if they see the potential,” Malinin recalls. “But then, of course, they didn’t add me to the team.”

So, Malinin returned to his life as a junior at George C. Marshall High in Falls Church, Va., attending classes in the morning and practicing for four hours in the afternoon. Like everyone



*“To do **A BACKFLIP, IN SKATES**, at the end of a program—that’s something [fans] can relate to.”*



else, he watched from home as the U.S. took silver in the team event. (Team USA was eventually elevated to gold after a 2024 ruling on a ROC doping violation.) Malinin watched as Chen dominated to win the men's competition, while Zhou tested positive for COVID-19 and withdrew, and Brown finished sixth. And he watched as Japanese skating legend and defending two-time

men's singles champ Yuzuru Hanyu set out on his main mission at the 2022 Games—to land the quad Axel—only to try it and tumble to the ice.

Through it all, Malinin tried not to picture himself in Beijing. Instead, he pictured himself in Milan.

As he tinkers with his free skate, there is one element Malinin always includes: a backflip. (The move was previously banned and only became legal in 2024.) He grew up preferring soccer to figure skating, even though his parents, Tatiana Malinina and Roman Skorniakov, both competed in the sport at the Olympic level



United States
Figure Skating

ILIA MALININ

SPORTS ILLUSTRATED 80

for Uzbekistan. (Malinina and Skorniakov gave their son the masculine version of his mother's surname because they feared his father's was too difficult for Americans to pronounce; as it turns out, they struggle with *MAL-uh-nin*, too.) *Just wait until he learns a triple jump*, Malinina's father, Russian figure skating coach Valery Malinin, told them. *Then you won't be able to tear him away*. As expected, the boy found his way into the family business. But since he follows the rest of the sports world, he understands that one obstacle to his breakthrough among casual fans is that they have never tried to do what he does.

Just about everyone has shot a basketball or kicked a soccer ball or hit a baseball, so we understand how much better the pros are. But how many of the people who tune into NBC every four years for figure skating can explain the difference between a Lutz and a loop, let alone execute either one? A backflip, though: "I'm sure they understand [it]," Malinin says. "But to do it on the ice, in skates, at the end of a program, after four minutes, when you're so tired, exhausted—that's something that they can relate to."

Well, maybe that's generous. But in fairness, even most other Olympic figure skaters cannot really relate to the level of difficulty Malinin embraces as a matter of course. Despite his bloodline, the 5'9" Malinin doesn't look as if he were built in a lab to excel at figure skating. His long limbs help him achieve incredible height on jumps, but that also means he has more mass to pull in and control to achieve a tight rotation. Indeed, Hanyu, who came closest to the quad Axel before Malinin pulled it off, had at 5'8" almost the opposite physique: long torso, short legs. But Malinin combines power and stamina in a way no one else in the sport can reach. Each quad jump is impressive on its own—especially the Axel, whose forward takeoff means it really amounts to four and a half revolutions in less than a second—but what really astonishes the people around him is Malinin's ability to stack them.

"[With] that many quads, it's hard to deliver the kind of program that looks like art," says Malinin's choreographer, Shae-Lynn Bourne. "The energy it takes to do those jumps is very different than someone, let's say, that's [doing] one quad and the rest are triples. You can really explore and push the [artistic] score, because you have the energy, but he's really pushing himself to have both."

As much as difficult jumps are admired in figure skating, the fact remains that the sport is all about a balance between athleticism and artistry. And unfairly, a skater who is so good at one is often bound to be shortchanged in the

other. Malinin has heard the criticism that it's impossible for him to do seven quads in one program and be a complete skater.

"I think absolutely you can," he says. "I think we have to put everything at an even playing field—so that people are trying quads, and they're getting rewarded for those, but the people that do quads and also skate beautifully and put their heart and soul into their performance also get a bonus from that."

He says what he focuses on now in training is not just achieving the jumps but executing them so that they seem effortless. (That training regimen, says Zakarian, is unremarkable: Malinin warms up, and then he skates. He does not do yoga or run marathons or lift heavy. "He's doing less [off the ice] than anybody else," says Zakarian. "There's no artificial intelligence or voodoo or magic tricks. He just works hard.") The Quad God wants to do quads so smoothly that the judges barely realize he's doing them.

That goal may not seem realistic. Most of Malinin's don't—until he pulls them off. His father, who along with his mother coaches him, will sometimes hear Bourne and Malinin discussing a particular plan—an especially quick piece of footwork, for example—and scoff. "No," Skorniakov will say. "He can't do that. It's just not possible."

"Yes, I can!" Malinin will bleat indignantly, and then he will. (Bourne suspects there might be a bit of reverse psychology at play.)

Malinin's team does not employ a mental skills coach, Zakarian says, "because he's his best psychologist."

Now a part-time student at George Mason—which he chose to stay close to home and his nearby training rink in Reston, Va.—Malinin has expressed interest in studying civil engineering. He has combined confidence and perfectionism since childhood, refusing to come inside until he drained his layups exactly the way he wanted to. That mentality allows him to stretch the concept of what is possible on the ice.

Bourne can't count the number of times she has arrived at the rink to find Malinin waiting for her, skates laced, beaming, ready to go.

"Even things that look life-threatening to me, that I wouldn't even attempt, he'll do," says Bourne. "There's no limit, really, with him."

For as intense as his programs are, Malinin remains loose. While other skaters lock in at events, pretending other skaters do not exist, refusing casual conversation, he makes small talk and cheers for his opponents.

OH, MY QUAD

In Milan, Malinin plans to showcase his breathtaking backflip and seven-quad skate.



Zakarian recalls the 2023 Grand Prix Final, in Beijing, when Malinin, skating last, watched each of his competitors nail their short program. Malinin had not planned to deploy his quadruple Axel at that point, but he knew he needed it to set himself apart. He barely seemed to register the stakes. He simply executed the first quad Axel ever landed in a short program; the computerized scoring system did not initially recognize it as possible. During the free skate, he added a quad loop to become the first skater to land every kind of quadruple jump.

Malinin is most focused on the future. He is already working on quintuple jumps, which he thinks he might try to show off after the Olympics. He also wants to grow his sport: The backflip is just part of his efforts to engage American fans. In Russia or Japan, Olympic-level figure skaters are mobbed everywhere they go; in the U.S., Malinin largely escapes notice. So he tries to hype up the crowd during warmups. His short program features “The Lost Crown,” a song from the *Prince of Persia* video game soundtrack, and he added his own spoken-word element to his free skate music.

He wants figure skating to adopt the ways of major sports leagues. Malinin has watched countless athletes enter arenas wearing high fashion. He imagines a world in which skaters stroll into the rink decked in designer clothes.

“Part of skating is you have to be authentic, you have to be creative, you have to be interesting,” he says. “So that’s something that I think fashion works really well with.”

In the meantime, he puts together outfits himself, a combination of expensive pieces and thrift-store finds, streetwear and tailored suiting separates. Malinin also sells Quad God merchandise at events and is working on his own fashion line. He sees these efforts as different means of expressing who he is—just like skating.

“When we’re making the program, it’s a blast, because we are enjoying it, and without the kind of monitoring of, *Oh, it’s the Olympics*,” says Bourne. “Will we impress this judge? No, we throw that away. Are we enjoying this? Is this what *you* want to say? Keeping it about what it should be about: his journey. It’s not anyone else’s.”

And in the end, she thinks that’s the secret to Malinin’s ability to manage the pressure. It’s not just about his technical ability or his artistic work or even his unshakable confidence. It’s both more and less complicated than that. The downside of being so far ahead of your opponents is that you’re not really competing with anyone else. The upside is that you’re only competing with yourself. □

SNARKY GIRL RETURNS



AFTER A CASUAL SKI TRIP REIGNITED HER PASSION FOR SKATING, ALYSA LIU IS BACK WITH A REFRESHED OUTLOOK

➤ **FINALLY, ALYSA LIU** is in charge of the direction her life is taking. Not just in figure skating, to which the erstwhile prodigy returned, two years after announcing her retirement in April 2022, to win six of her first 12 events, including the 2025 world championships last March and the '25 Grand Prix Final in December. Not just in her programs, where she has taken on a greater role in selecting her costumes, her choreography and her music. And not even just in her off-ice future, where she is studying psychology at UCLA.

No, literally: At 20, Liu now has a driver's license.

“I really have so much control over my life,” she gushes. “I can just go wherever I want, and I’m not on, like, my dad’s schedule. Before, he would drive me to the rink, pick me up. I was more on his timing. Now I’m on my own.”

So far, her timing is just about perfect. Her decision to retire at 16—two months after finishing sixth in her Olympic debut in Beijing and just a few weeks after winning bronze at the 2022 world championships—seemed abrupt to many onlookers. They only saw the girl who’d become at 12 the youngest skater to land a triple Axel; at 13 the youngest U.S. national champion ever; and at 14 the first American woman

to land a quadruple jump. But Liu saw the girl who started skating at age 5, trudged to practice and followed a schedule that other people had set for her, all to compete in a sport in fulfillment of other people’s dreams. And the last two years had come amid a pandemic, leaving the extroverted Liu—already fighting through homeschooling to accommodate skating—with almost no real-life interactions. She felt trapped. She could only see one way out.

She loved life after skating, visiting Los Angeles cafés with friends who didn’t know how to pronounce Salchow, dabbling in volleyball and tennis, hiking to the base camp of Mount Everest. But one day in early 2024, she went skiing with those friends and felt the first rush of adrenaline since putting away her skates. Then she took a trip to a rink. [She realized that at some point in the intervening two years she had lost her skates; eventually they turned up.] She tried a double Axel and landed it. Her brain started to whirl.

She called her old coach, Phillip DiGuglielmo, to tell him she was ready to stage a comeback. “Why would you do this to yourself?” he scoffed. After two hours of negotiation—and



MILAN • CORTINA
2026

a bottle of California red for DiGuglielmo—he got on board.

For most women, figure skating becomes harder as they age and their bodies develop. The last four Olympic women's champions were 17 years old on average. But Liu has performed better at 19 and 20 than she did at 15 and 16, which she attributes in part to the maturity her age has brought her—and in part to the break she took.

"I don't think I wanted to do any competition before," she mused during the 2025 worlds. She added, "Besides not wanting to do it, I definitely wasn't ready for competitions ever, in my opinion."

Now she sees the sport differently. Sometimes she barely sees it as a sport at all. She likes to perform, and she has put herself in a position where she gets to perform for a lot of people. Where's the downside?

"I would love to do a clean program where my choreography looks good [from] start to end, fast spins and no mishaps, because I want to be fully proud of my performance," she says. "And how I rate that is: Would I post my full performance on Instagram? If I wouldn't, *Oh, probably not that good. Or, Things could be better.* I'm pretty picky with myself."

"But I wouldn't necessarily say I'm nervous, because one thing about me is I really don't have any anxiety. Like, I have none in my normal life, on ice—nothing. In

order for me to be anxious about something, it would have to mean I'm really counting on it or depending on it [and I'm] not really depending on skating.

"Of course there's meaning, but I find the meaning in the art, and there's no way to go wrong with that. Even mistakes in art can still be beautiful, and it's still a story. And I can appreciate that. Let's say I'm at the Olympics and I mess up on a few jumps or something, and I just totally do bad. No medal, bottom placement. I don't know. That just doesn't seem like a horrible situation. I'd still be O.K. with that. Because if it were a movie, I'd still watch that movie. There's other things I have in my life. [And] there's also always another chance for you to perform better. I guess the worst part about that would be people seeing me do bad and then not seeing how a good program looks. But I could always record myself doing a good program with cool videography and post it."

Most of her competitors are probably not looking at the Olympics this way. The majority of coaches and fans are likely not either. But after walking away and then coming back, Liu understands now: Those people are passengers on her journey. She is driving. —S.A.

NEXT DOOR

In a *New York Times* opinion piece in August, Canadian writer Stephen Marche wrote: “Canada is living through an era of acute, sustained, profound and abiding rage. The source is President Trump; the object is the United States.” The month before, he launched an eight-part podcast series on Canada’s freshly fraught relationship with what had been its forever friendly neighbor, the United States. The name of the podcast series: *Gloves Off*.

Hockey term. Of course.

Once arm in arm, the two countries now are squaring off politically, economically—and on the ice. The modern version of their hockey rivalry was spiced up last February when a U.S.-Canada game in the 4 Nations Face-Off, a new international tournament featuring NHL standouts, turned into fight night. The home crowd in Montreal booed “The Star-Spangled Banner,” setting a pugnacious tone, and thereafter the gloves were, indeed, off.

Brothers Matthew and Brady Tkachuk of the U.S. were the fire starters. Matthew, a winger for the Panthers, skated up to Canadian and Lightning forward Brandon Hagel before the opening face-off and asked him to fight. Hagel obliged as soon as the game started. After the first bout ended—let’s call it a draw—Brady, a winger for the Senators, fought Panthers forward Sam Bennett. Six seconds after the restart, American J.T. Miller, a Rangers forward, topped it off by brawling with Blues defenseman Colton Parayko.

The three fights took place in the first nine seconds of play—an eruption of violence rarely seen in international hockey, with a roaring crowd in the Bell Centre ratcheting up the intensity. The U.S. backed up its feistiness by winning that game, 3–1, but lost a more peaceful 4 Nations final five days later to the Canadians in Boston.

Already one of the most enduring
and fiercest rivalries in sports,
the **U.S. VS. CANADA HOCKEY**
feud will be magnified in Milan,
amid recent political tensions and
fiery on-ice clashes



MILAN CORTINA
2026





U.S. vs. Canada
Hockey

SPORTS ILLUSTRATED

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BY PAT FORDE

CHASE AGNELLO-DEAN/ANFO/
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GETTY IMAGES



MILAN CORTINA
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The next international hockey tournament is the big one, the 2026 Winter Games in Milan Cortina. NHL players will compete in the Olympics for the first time in 12 years. (Fighting is strictly prohibited in Olympic hockey and results in ejection.) Away from the rink, a tense political climate still simmers. Elbows up.

"4 Nations was a great little appetizer," Matthew Tkachuk says. "The main course is up next. I think it's going to be even more intense."

The brothers insist that the Tkachuks vs. Canucks fisticuffs were not a reflection of the political zeitgeist. Just a hockey decision that was made shortly before taking the ice.

"I'm sorry, I don't talk politics," Matthew says. "I just play hockey. ... We were just thinking, *How are we going to go into this away rink, the most hostile environment a lot of us have ever been in, and kind of flip the script?*"

This riveting hockey showdown played out shortly after Donald Trump won re-election, announced a 25% tariff on all Canadian goods in February and began airing an out-of-nowhere interest in annexing Canada to "become our 51st state." The aggrieved country responded in kind, applying a reciprocal tariff on American imports.

This rise in tensions has been significant enough north of the world's longest undefended border that it has affected the leadership of the country. Prime minister Mark Carney's election win last April was owed largely to a tough, sovereignty-focused stance against potential American encroachment. Pew Research from July indicates that Canadians see the U.S. as both the country's greatest ally and its greatest threat.

"It's been a very drastic year," Marche says. "On some level, Canadians and Americans are always going to be bound together. It's like we're family members, and one person in the family has gone insane. They're showing up at your house at night with a knife asking for money. There's anger toward the U.S., but also a sense of distrust."

Will Olympic hockey heal the distrust? Or further inflame it?

On the morning of Aug. 3, hundreds of cyclists gathered at City Pier in Port Angeles, Wash. The ruggedly beautiful Olympic Peninsula is "where the mountains meet the sea," as Port Angeles

likes to say. The cyclists embarked on the annual "Ride the Hurricane," a steep, 40-mile climb up and down Hurricane Ridge in Olympic National Park. Afterward, they gathered on the pier to eat chili, drink beer and rehash the ride.

The context around the event hinted at a missing element. Canadian maple leaf flags flapped next to the Stars and Stripes on several buildings. A sign on the way into downtown read, WE WELCOME OUR CANADIAN FRIENDS! The message was clear: *No hard feelings here, please come visit.*

The Strait of Juan de Fuca separates the two countries, with the U.S.-based M.V. Coho ferry carrying cars and pedestrians on a 90-minute trip between Victoria and Port Angeles. There is not as much southbound traffic as there once was.

"We're definitely seeing a reduction of visits from Canada," says Port Angeles mayor Kate Dexter, who cites a roughly 15% decline in business from Canadians.

Lynnette Braillard, who coordinates public relations for Visit Port Angeles, says traffic to that tourism-based website plummeted "almost 100%" when Trump retook office in January. But she says there have been signs of a warming trend in recent months. The three-day Port Angeles Dungeness Crab Festival in October saw an uptick in Canadian participation from earlier in 2025, for example. But things are still not what they were before the 2024 presidential election.

"The Canadians are basically saying, 'It's not you guys, it's your president. And we're not going to support this or stand for this,'" Braillard says.

On July 2, in between Canada Day and Independence Day, the mayors of International Falls, Minn., and Fort Frances, Ontario, got together on the northern side of the border that runs between the two towns. A barbecue was held at the Fort Frances Civic Centre, with citizens from both communities attending. City, state, province and national flags were raised. A "Proclamation of Friendship" was read.

"With all the political stuff going on, we wanted to formally recognize, in writing, our friendship," Fort Frances mayor Andrew Hallikas says. "We wanted to make sure there was no dispute. Our communities are so intertwined."

Fort Frances residents get gas and groceries and eat meals on the U.S. side. International Falls residents visit the Walmart in Fort Frances—and the snowmobile dealership. The two high schools play against each other in several sports, with the rivalry sharpest when the International Falls Broncos face the Fort Frances Muskies in hockey.



U.S. vs. CANADA
Hockey

SPORTS ILLUSTRATED

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"We depend on each other greatly," says International Falls mayor Drake Dill. "But there's certainly been some changes."

The standard assumption in the U.S. is that Canadians are too laid-back to annoy. The standard assumption in Canada is that Americans are nuts, but trustworthy. Both are up for revision.

"The U.S. has always been Canada's favorite TV show," says *Toronto Star* columnist Bruce Arthur. "We consume American culture to a degree most other countries don't. The current situation has been a shock to our system. There's genuine worry about the people in power. It's incredibly serious."

Matthew and Brady Tkachuk aren't just the sons of a hockey great. Keith Tkachuk ranks among the U.S.'s foremost Olympians, having competed in four Winter Games between 1992 and 2006. He was on a silver-medal-winning squad in Salt Lake City in 2002, but primarily was part of U.S. teams that were a cut below Canada and others internationally.

BAD BLOOD

The Tkachuk brothers (opposite) set off the 4 Nations tussles (top) but Canada had the event's last laugh, winning on a McDavid golden goal that echoed Crosby's at the 2010 Games (above).

The boys were young when Keith was playing in the Games, but they saw enough to catch the spirit. They imagined themselves scoring the gold-medal-winning goal playing with mini sticks in the family home. "He's got incredible stories from playing on U.S. soil in Salt Lake City," Matthew says of his dad. "I've had two dreams in my professional life—win a Stanley Cup and win an Olympic gold medal. I've got the first."

The NHL pulled the plug on Olympic participation in 2018 and '22, stalling the younger Tkachuks' vision. With Matthew now 28 and Brady 26, they're in the prime of their careers as part of a vastly improved U.S. program. Pushing Canada's loaded team into overtime in the 4 Nations final, five days after the Brawl in Montreal, set the stage for Italy.

"It's been a dream come true to be able to represent [my] country," Brady says. "It's an honor. 4 Nations was probably my favorite hockey memory. It was just the best-on-best, first time in eight years, and to be one shot away from being the best country—it's something that's given [us] a ton of motivation."

In Milan, there will be ample competition from other nations, but North America will be undoubtedly fixated on a 4 Nations rematch, with Olympic medals and bragging rights on the line.

"Being American and playing for our country, we'll do absolutely whatever it takes," Matthew says. "I think the country is going to be really proud of how we represent them."

For Canada, reclaiming Olympic men's hockey gold for the first time since 2014 is nonnegotiable. It's the nation's sport, and there is no acceptable excuse for not winning.

"The 4 Nations is a made-up event," Arthur says. "But it mattered a lot that we won. We booed your anthem, as pure an expression of our feelings for the U.S. as it can get."

Marche says he believes Connor McDavid will be commemorated on a postage stamp for scoring the overtime winner in the 4 Nations final, which eerily echoed Sidney Crosby's golden goal for Canada against the U.S. in the 2010 Olympics.

The tension of last winter might not be replicable this time around, especially in Italy. An Olympic venue applies indirect heat, not the blast furnaces of crowds in Montreal and Boston. But Olympic gold medals are forever—no country has won more than Canada's nine—and this one might mean more than any of the others.

"We're truly living in a f---ed-up world if the result of a hockey game has historical experience," says Marche. "But the stakes for this are jacked up, right to the brim." □



POINT AFTER

RE-RISING STAR



THE U.S. OLYMPIC Alpine ski team won't be set until mid-January. But as 2025 drew to a close, the potential lineup got a lot more interesting. On Dec. 12, 41-year-old Lindsey Vonn, who returned to the sport last season on a titanium knee after six years in retirement, won the downhill at a World Cup event in St. Moritz, Switzerland. She's now the oldest skier—male or female—to win a World Cup race and

a front-runner to qualify for a spot in the Games. The three-time Olympic medalist called it the most meaningful victory of her career.

Vonn may not be America's Best Woman Skier Ever (as SI dubbed her before the 2010 Games, *left*). That honor goes to Mikaela Shiffrin (*page 74*). She has already qualified for Milan Cortina, where the U.S. ski team could be the most icon-filled attraction.

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